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DOWNLAND ECHOES

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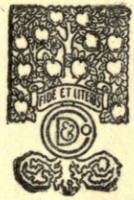
BY VICTOR L. WHITECHURCH



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To all who love the open Downland, the wide expanses, the sweet hill breezes, the glow of fair sunsets and drifting clouds:

To all who love the sturdy folk of the Downland—in clustering villages remote from the outer world, in lonely upland dwellings,

I Dedicate this Book.

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THE POACHER

DOWNLAND ECHOES

I

THE POACHER

THERE were two principal types in the village. First, men with thin faces and noses and dark hair and eyes—eyes that were set near each other and did not easily look you straight in the face. Perhaps—indeed, most likely—their ancestors were Britons; Britons who were never altogether driven westward by the invader.

The other men were fair of hair and fresh-faced—faces inclining to roundness, with big noses and light eyes. Anglo-Saxon these. Men that got louder and more quarrelsome than the dark-faced men when drunk—if so be that they drank, but men you would sooner quarrel with, all the same—that is, if your quarrel were not to be a lasting one.

Tom Horner was of the thin-faced variety. He wore little side-whiskers, and the rest of his face he shaved about twice a week, so he looked darker some days than others. He was tallish, as men went, and spare. His dark

eyes were particularly close together and his brow lowering.

He advertised himself as professing two trades, and everybody knew he was an expert at a third. The two trades openly acknowledged were those of well-digging and thatching; his more exciting accomplishment was poaching. And no man ever knew which of the three was most profitable to him, though most men who were acquainted with him guessed the third was.

The well-digging and thatching were, of course, executed in public. The third profession was, equally naturally, followed in strict privacy and at uncertain hours. Moreover, Tom Horner was as taciturn as befitted his unlawful craft, except at such times when he had freely imbibed malt liquor. And even then, he never gave away any really useful information.

To see him coming sauntering from the Downs in the early morning was always suspicious. Yet if one of his two sworn enemies, of whom more anon, chanced to meet him, as if by accident, and, attracted by a bulge in his capacious coat, enjoined him incontinently to disgorge, the said enemy—who was customarily arrayed in blue—would, as likely as not, be confronted with a pocketful

of mushrooms, much to his discomfiture, while Tom Horner would invite him to "taäke a few on 'em hoäme for your missus. She wants summat to cheer her up at mealtimes wi' *your* ugly face in front o' her, I reckon!"

The man in blue, inwardly swearing, knew perfectly well that Tom Horner had not been on the Downs before sunrise for the sole purpose of picking mushrooms. Yet there was no trace of hares about him.

Nevertheless, before the day was out, there would probably be more than one monetary transaction in unlawful game. And therein lay one of the hidden mysteries of the countryside. William Budd, that fresh, Saxon-faced man-of-all-work who, honest as his open countenance, invariably denounced Tom Horner as "no good of," when he went in the evening after the day's work to "tidy up" the garden of "that 'ere lady from Lunnon" who rented a cottage in the village, came down for week-ends, and wrote occasional articles on country life for magazines—articles which were utterly misleading, because, as they said with truth, "*she* doän't know nought about we folk"—William Budd would look up from his job of planting out pot flowers and say artlessly to the said "lady from Lunnon":

"I suppose you 'oodn't like to buy a hare, miss? I had one give ma to-daäy—a nice un. T'ent much use to me, and you can have un cheap."

And the Lunnon lady, whose knowledge of country life was so profound that it ran to articles delineating the extreme simplicity of the natives, would very likely ask:

"How did you get it, Budd? I hope you haven't been poaching?"

For even *she* knew that hare-snaring was unlawful.

To which Budd, indignation in his honest blue eyes at such suspicion:

"Me go a-poachin'! Not me, miss. I doän't hold wi' sich waäys. But you see, miss, a man I knows over at Binford goes a beatin' when the Squire there has a big shoot and they generally gi'es him a hare or two—and sometimes he gi'es me one on 'em. 'Tis that way, miss. How much? Well, they're fetchin' about three and six, I've heered—but you can have un for harf a crown."

And William Budd spends an extra sixpence "up at public" that night, while Tom Horner looks thoughtfully at a florin to make sure it's a "good un."

Others purchased the surreptitious hare without such evasion on the part o the seller.

The wooden-faced landlord of the Blue Lion knew to a nicety the dozen or so within his circle of acquaintances who would pay cash down, ready-money, if moderate amount, for a hare—and wouldn't expect to fetch it or have it delivered by one of his youngsters till after dark was fallen. And Tom Horner was a good customer of his — and friendship demanded that one should do good customers good turns sometimes.

The other sworn enemy of Tom Horner's was one Godfrey Wheeler. Godfrey Wheeler was a man of money. He was true country born and bred, had farmed once upon a time, but had long since given it up to live an independent life in the village. He was the only man in Little Marpleton who purchased a game licence—his name could be seen, in solitary state, hung up in the lists at the tiny post office. And he rented the shooting of the Downs from the three farmers who were occupiers there.

No more kindly-hearted man existed in the village than Godfrey Wheeler. His was an extremely generous nature, and he had that rare virtue of not wishing his left hand to possess any knowledge of the doings of his right. Paäson was often his intermediary, and only Paäson knew, for example, how it was that

Widow Bunce's rent was always forthcoming when due, or who provided a new donkey-cart for poor old Peter Smith when that worthy met with an accident and drove into the ditch.

But, where one particular subject was concerned, the milk of human kindness turned sour in the breast of Godfrey Wheeler. In his eyes the very worst crime that the Prince of Darkness had ever invented to menace the salvation of humanity was the crime of poaching. Had he been a magistrate he would have liked to have sentenced the man who shot a pheasant by night, or snared a hare, to a flogging. Had he been a judge, and had the law allowed him, he would probably have rejoiced to put on the black cap, to sentence the culprit to be hanged by the neck till he was dead, and, when concluding with the awful phrase "and may God have mercy upon your soul," have very much doubted the efficacy of such a prayer.

He was inexorable where poaching was concerned. No one—not even Paäson—might say a good word for Tom Horner. The latter was the black sheep of the village, the disgrace to the community, and he spared no pains to hunt him down. He considered that, before aught else, it was the duty of the unfortunate Jarvis—the local policeman aforementioned—

continually to be at the heels of Tom Horner, to know his goings out and his comings in, to concentrate every art of his profession to frustrate the machinations of this notorious criminal, or, better still, to catch him in the act or with game in his pockets. He led Jarvis such a life, threatening to report him for negligence, sending for him when he was off duty to impart a string of suspicions or information, that the wretched policeman, who wanted to qualify for sergeant's stripes and naturally longed for a burglary, or arson, or something that would really bring him into prominence, and who could not—who dared not—offend him, nurtured an extreme hatred of the cause of all his worries—to wit, Tom Horner himself.

Tom Horner knew, perfectly well, the aims and objects of his two enemies. But, to his credit, he did not bear them malice. At least, not entirely. He was a true sportsman and quite content to take his chances. He knew it was the duty of Jarvis to catch him, and the duty—or pleasure—of Godfrey Wheeler to prosecute him if caught, and the duty of the magistrates to inflict punishment. According to his code, he did not grudge a man for doing his duty. According to the same code, *his* duty was to outwit his enemies and snare hares. But what he *did* object to, especially, was

the temper of Jarvis. He longed to thrash the policeman—or try to thrash him in fair fight. But a policeman is no ordinary man, and you can't put your fist in his face with impunity.

In the course of the continual warfare there stood out four victories: one for Godfrey Wheeler, one for Jarvis, and two for Tom Horner. And Tom Horner always considered that his two victories were the greatest of all, more especially as he continued plying his craft before, between, and after them. Whereupon the facts shall be laid bare.

Godfrey Wheeler caught Tom Horner in the very act, saw him take the hare out of the cunningly laid snare. Watched him, rejoicing, from within the edge of a copse on the Downs. Emerged triumphant to confront him. There was no getting away from it, no possible defence, and Tom Horner handed over the defunct animal and said:

"I suppose you means to have me into Derringford over this job, Muster Wheeler?"

"You're right. I certainly do," replied the other. To "have a man into Derringford" was the vernacular for haling him before the bench of magistrates in that town.

So Tom Horner simply turned on his heel without another word, and strode down into the village, thinking lurid thoughts. It was

not being "had into Derringford" that angered him, but the fact that Godfrey Wheeler had got the better of him on his own particular stage of action—the Downs. Had he been caught with bulging pockets it would not have mattered so much, but to be *seen* by his enemy in the very act was mortifying beyond words.

Not that he did not use words. He did. He used them very freely on the person on whom he considered Providence had specially designed them to be used—to wit, his wife. And ended by throwing things at her across the table. There was also a scene in the taproom of the Blue Lion that evening. Someone had the temerity to remark:

"They says Muster Wheeler's goin' to have a dinner party to-morrow—got a hare what wants eatin'."

After forcibly expelling Tom Horner the landlord picked up the pieces of the quart pot and order was restored.

For, of course, all the village knew about it. Godfrey Wheeler had gone down the street, hare in hand, rejoicing in explanations. In the warmth of his glee, on meeting Paäson, he had disbursed, without being asked for it, twenty shillings to the sick and needy fund.

When the case came before the magistrates

Tom Horner appeared in his Sunday best, clean-shaven, and nosegay in buttonhole. The case did not take very long to decide. The presiding magistrate was a local tradesman, secretly sympathising with the delinquent—being of radical and anti-game law tendencies, but had to do something. He imposed a fine of one pound and three and sixpence costs—or the alternative of fourteen days.

Godfrey Wheeler was disgusted. "Ought to have had three months without an option," he murmured. When Tom Horner said he had no money Jarvis took courage, expecting a fortnight's relaxation. But the magistrate was tender-hearted, and listened to Horner's request for time.

"Very well," he said, "we'll give you a week to pay—but you'll have to go to prison if you don't. Next case."

Tom Horner stepped out of the dock, touching his forehead to the majesty of the law, smiled affably at Godfrey Wheeler, and put his tongue in his cheek and winked at Jarvis when he passed him on his way out of the court.

Jarvis, of course, was charged with the collection of the money at the end of the allotted week of grace. He put his handcuffs in his pocket before paying the call, and antici-

pated a journey to Derringford with Horner as his prisoner. For he knew—as everyone else knew—that Horner had not done a stroke of well-digging or thatching all the week.

The poacher received him with an amiable smile.

"Oh! got to pay up, have I?"

"Or else go to gaol."

"Who'd taäke me there!"

"I would," said Jarvis, putting his hand into his pocket and feeling for the fetters in case of the resistance he anticipated—and hoped for.

"Ah! T'ood be a pity to give 'ee all that trouble. How much be I to pay?"

"One pound three and sixpence."

"All right."

To the policeman's disappointment he produced a handful of silver and counted the money.

"Now you get out o' my house, wull 'ee, please? I be a respectable man and doänt want the likes o' *you* hanging about."

That evening Tom Horner was leaning over his gate, smoking, at peace with the world, when William Budd came up street.

"Hullo, Tom," he said, "you be still here then?"

"Ah!" ejaculated Tom.

"Paid up, have 'ee?"

Tom nodded—and beamed. William's curiosity was aroused, and he asked a direct question.

"How did 'ee get the money?"

Tom Horner thought for a minute. Then he took his pipe from his mouth and said, slowly and deliberately:

"How did I get the money? Why, I snared a few moäre o' old Wheeler's hares and sold 'em. *That's* how I got it. Reckon *he* had to pay—not *me!*"

His was the victory, and in his elation he did not mind men knowing the strategy by which he had achieved it. Besides, he knew it would not be long before Godfrey Wheeler himself heard the story.

His second victory was even more to his liking, though less subtle. Jarvis scored, caught him fairly with his pockets full of game, and had him before the magistrates. Jarvis stood in the witness-box, avenging Nemesis, pocket-book in hand, and, commencing with the perfectly untrue but official formula "From information received," proved himself an exceedingly astute guardian of the law, taking great pains to prevent anyone thinking what was really the case, that the capture was a fluke. This time there was no option of a fine. Tom

Horner had to go to prison at Wellborough for three weeks. The story of his return home was told by himself to an admiring—though not envious—circle in the Blue Lion taproom.

"Ah, they didn't treat ma so baäd up at Wellborough. The governer come to see ma once—nice spoke gen'leman 'a was. And the Paäson, too. The Paäson give ma a tract, and I brought un hoäme fur Ezra Padge—here 'tis, Ezra. 'Tis about curin' 'eeself o' baäd language, and I hope it 'ull do 'ee good."

And he tossed it over the table. The cure did not commence on the spot, and the landlord had to stop the remarks volunteered by Ezra Padge.

"Ah, you read un, Ezra," went on Tom Horner, "t'ool stop 'ee sayin' such wicked words. The warders warn't a baäd lot, neither —taäke 'em all in all. There was one as I took quite a fancy to. Met un when I came out—off duty, and stood 'un a pint to show I didn't bear 'un no ill will. And they give ma a ticket back to Derringford.

"I walked hoäme from Derringford across the fields——"

He stopped, took a big pull at his mug, and chuckled long and audibly.

"What be the matter, Tom?"

"I'll tell 'ee—'tis that 'ere Jarvis. As I

was a-comin' along I overtook Bill Thatcher, and walked wi' he. Lucky I did. Presently we meets Jarvis a-goin' into Derringford, meets 'un as we were gettin' over the stile in Muster Bilby's forty-acre medder. And Jarvis began a-laughin' at I, askin' how I loiked bread and skilly, and a-tellin' ma it served ma right."

He chuckled again and took another drink.

"Well," he went on, "I just ups wi' ma fist and caught un one under the chin afore he knowed what I was a-doin'." Then I gets un in the eye and knocks un into the ditch. He came out wi' his helmet bashed in, his coat tore, and all covered wi' muck. Haw, haw, haw!"

"'T'ent no larfin' matter for *you*," said Ezra Padge.

"Yes 'tis. And I'll tell 'ee for why. He dursn't summon ma for assault. I've got Bill Thatcher for a witness."

"What's that to do wi' it?"

"Can't 'ee see, ye fool? Why, I hadn't done nothin' and he had no business to saäy naught. He *provoked* ma. And he knows I can prove it. And a bobby what goes out o' his waäy to provoke an innercent person ain't a-goin' to get promotion. He's forced to taäke what I give un and kip his mouth shut."

RETICENCE

II

RETICENCE

Nearly everybody who really belonged to the village was reticent. It was one of the characteristics of their lives. For this reason the outsider seldom understood the countryman, not knowing that what he imagined was sheer ignorance or stupidity was often the cloak for an underlying shrewdness that rarely became apparent on the surface.

This characteristic reticence was hereditary. It had come down through the centuries. British ancestors had to make use of it in Roman times, for it was not wise to let the dominant race know all there was to know about them. Saxon forefathers had to practise concealment under the conquering Normans. In feudal times the villeins were not over-anxious that the lord of the manor should be aware of all their doings. The landlordism that dates from the seventeenth century helped to produce further the wielding of the weapon of reticence. And so it was that the quality of secretiveness was so strongly developed

that it became difficult to find out reasons for actions. They didn't, as a rule, give any reasons. But they had them. To begin to discover reasons you had to live among them. At first they seemed a simple people, easy to understand, but at the end of five years you were a wise person if you admitted, candidly, that you really knew little about them. *Then* you commenced to learn, and the learning was no easy task. Rarely would they admit reasons for actions to anyone whom they had not learned to trust. But once they trusted you, there was a chance of grasping something of their peculiar psychology.

For example, there was the case of the Choir Strike in the village of East Harford. Paäson there introduced a new hymn-book, with the full approval of the adult members of the choir. They, one and all, said they were pleased with it. They knew—as every village choir knew—that they were the very best choir in Downland. They spoke of the fact quite naturally — especially when they met choirmen of other parishes. So they knew it was quite right for them to have fresh opportunities of showing their powers in the way of new hymns and new tunes. Had Paäson suggested that they should attempt the "Hallelujah Chorus" as an anthem for the

harvest festival they would not have turned a hair.

Therefore Paäson, who understood them just a little, knew that there was no false modesty about it when the men of the choir suddenly, without warning, refused to sing any of the hymns in the new book. At practice they sat down when the hymns were rehearsed, glaring straight in front of them and refusing to open their mouths—leaving the task to the boys. In service time they stood quite dumb during the singing of hymns, ostentatiously bookless. Paäson expostulated, asked them their reasons, but all he got out of them was:

"We ent goin' to sing ara hymn out o' that new book."

At length, one night at practice, the oldest man, on being pressed, grudgingly admitted:

"We thinks the book's silly, sir!"

"Silly? But *why?* What makes you say that?"

But they only sat silent.

Next practice Paäson pressed the point. As it happened he had lived some years among them and had somewhat gained their confidence. Otherwise he would never have arrived at the real reason.

The oldest choirman took up one of the offending hymn-books, opened it, slowly turned

the pages over, found what he wanted and handed it to Paäson, pointing out a particular couplet with his long forefinger.

Paäson read out loud the words of that ancient hymn:

> "Thy turrets and thy pinnacles
> With carbuncles shall shine."

"Well?" he asked.

"There, sir," came the reply, "we ent goin' to sing such foolishness as that. Whoever heered tell o' decoratin' towers wi' *corns and bunions!*"

Their reason was a perfectly legitimate one. They had never heard of a precious stone called the carbuncle, but they did know what a carbuncle on the back of the neck was like. They reasoned quite logically. They acted quite logically. To them the book *was* foolish. An outsider who knew nothing about the rustic mind, and who could never have abstracted their real motive, would have denounced them as being stupid and pig-headed.

There was a village working men's club. Paäson thought he would amuse the men, so one evening he went in and, uninvited, read them one of the funniest stories of a particularly humorous author. It was a screamingly

comic yarn, but not the vestige of a smile appeared on the face of a single man there. The ordinary observer would have said that they had no sense of humour, but he would have been quite wrong. The real reason was nothing of the kind. For a long time they refused to say what it was. They had recourse to the inevitable weapon of reticence. They told the usual perversion of the truth. They said they didn't see anything in what they had heard. But Paäson knew better, and persevered. Then it came out. One man said reluctantly:

"Well, sir, we doän't like being treated like children. We can all o' us read for ourselves if we want to."

He had insulted them. Without knowing it, he had really hurt their pride, as people are constantly hurting the pride of the agricultural labourer. It rankled bitterly; struck at their sturdy independence. They acted on pure reason. It was a sense of their own dignity that made them refuse to laugh.

They so often scored over this reticence of theirs. Just outside the village was a bit of land, known from immemorial days as "Church Acre," let by the churchwardens from year to year, and the proceeds paid in to the "church expenses." The letting of the

said piece of ground always dated from Michaelmas, according to ancient custom.

One Michaelmas, Farmer Wood and his fellow-churchwarden, Farmer Gringer, came to see Paäson. They told him that William Briggs, also a farmer, who for years had rented "Church Acre," refused to take it on again unless they granted him a reduction of rent.

"He's always paid fifty shillings for it," said Farmer Wood, "and now he says he won't give more than forty-five."

"You see, Vicar," explained Farmer Gringer, "'tis this way. We don't want to lower the value o' 'Church Acre.' It has brought us in fifty shillings a year as long as I can remember, and 'tis a pity to drop five shillings."

Paäson agreed. He knew how closely the churchwardens reckoned—after the manner of their kind. Five shillings was no insignificant sum. *No* sum, even fivepence, was ever insignificant to their minds. Besides, this was establishing a bad precedent—the lowering of the value of Church *property*, a far more serious business from their point of view than strict orthodoxy of doctrine. It was downright faithfulness to the Church that made them come to him. He knew this.

"Oh," he said, "can't you persuade old

William Briggs to take it on for the same rent ?"

But they said they had tried hard to do this, with blank refusal.

"William's orkard," explained Farmer Gringer.

"Well," said Paäson, "I'll have a talk with him myself and see what I can do."

They assented to his proposition, but were dubious of results.

So Paäson went to see William Briggs, and found him, as usual, affable and charming. He was smoking, so Paäson pulled out his own pipe and pouch, hoping to arrange matters over the peaceful weed as man to man.

Old William listened in silence while Paäson propounded the reason for keeping up the rent and exhorted him as a good Churchman—which he was—to agree to the payment of the fifty shillings in full. And when he had finished William took his pipe from his mouth and said, without the slightest prevarication or the propounding of any difficulty whatsoever:

"All right, Vicar. I see your point of view; and I'll be pleased to take on 'Church Acre' as usual for fifty shillings. 'T'ent worth more than forty-five, but what you say is quite right."

Paäson went forth elated. He had done

what the churchwardens could not do. He had, with the greatest ease, talked over the old farmer. It was a great feather in his clerical hat, metaphorically speaking. He rejoiced exceedingly in his own diplomacy and persuasive powers, and took the earliest opportunity of informing the churchwardens of his victory.

But they, knowing their own kind a great deal better than he did, instead of patting him on the back, only shook their heads. And Farmer Wood said:

"Ah! I'm afraid William 'ull best us yet. 'T'ent like him not to."

At Easter—six months later, during which period William kept strict silence on the matter of "Church Acre"—folks paid a subscription to church expenses. They did not call it a subscription. They called it a "voluntary rate." It was a survival of the old "church rate," and they had agreed to pay it years before on the condition that there should not be collections at every service in the church.

Farmer Gringer collected it. In due course he asked William Briggs for his customary subscription. William pulled out of his pocket the canvas bag that served him for a purse and produced five shillings.

"But," said Gringer, "'tis ten shillings you always give, William."

William half-closed one of his eyes and replied deliberately:

"Ah! But Paäson wanted me to give 'ee fifty shillings for 'Church Acre.' I told him 'twas only worth forty-five. I can only give 'ee five shillings now instead o' ten. I had to make it up to myself somehow!"

They were right: he had bested them. And Paäson came down from his pedestal to the level of the humility that he felt he deserved.

"BLOODS"

III

"BLOODS"

THEY were never called by that name, of course, but they *were* the "bloods" of the village, all the same. The "lady from Lunnon" who wrote country-life sketches spoke of them as "hobbledehoys," but then she never knew anything about them at all. Had she lived in the village for five years and been a discerning person she would have confessed to an utter ignorance of the life around her, but as she only came down for occasional week-ends she thought the "copy" based on her observations perfect.

The "bloods" were pure natives and purely agricultural, of ages varying from seventeen to the early twenties. Weekdays they toiled on the land in various capacities, Sundays they paraded in groups and glory of ready-made best clothes. Weekday evenings they also paraded in groups, but not in best clothes. Wealthier "bloods" possessed bicycles and went further afield.

Sunday, naturally, was the great day for

them. To be in the height of fashion was to sport a large-linked silver watch chain with silver ornaments thereto affixed and a big buttonhole. Sometimes the ruling fashion demanded *two* buttonholes, one on either side of the coat. Bowler hats were also accessories of the leading "bloods," worn well on the back of the head, showing carefully oiled hair.

The customary greeting when arrayed in Sunday habiliments and enjoying idle hours was "How be?" That is how they saluted each other. The opposite sex, when passing, were generally greeted with loud coughs—and seemed to understand.

Just outside the church door was a great Sunday evening meeting-place. They assembled an hour or so before service and had many subtle jokes among themselves. As worshippers began to arrive remarks were passed, generally intended to be overheard especially when it was the case with maidens.

"I wish *I* had a hat wi' daisies in it!"

"*I* sh'd like a green parrasole to kip the rain off!"

And Mary Blake and Rose Padge, who respectively possessed the objects in question, would nudge each other violently, and giggle,

and look over their shoulders, and then stick up their heads in assumed indignation as they entered the church, making mental notes, nevertheless, that a daisy-trimmed hat and a green parasol had been excellent attractions.

Then would appear Tom Moorcock, one of their fraternity, who had detached himself from his own sex only recently to walk out with Kitty Walters. Up the churchyard path he came, awkward in gait and red of face, Kitty walking demurely by his side. He knew the ordeal before him, having helped many a time to inflict it on others. A loud "Haw, haw, haw" as they appeared, followed by a general chorus of "How be, Tom?" to which he returned a reluctant "How be?" accompanied with a ghastly attempt at a smile followed by a side-glance at Kitty to see how she received the ejaculation, "I sh'd loike a purty gal wi' a blue dress to taäke ma to church," and escaping into the sacred edifice with a pointed reference to "puttin' up th' banns" ringing in his ear, while Kitty admonished him to "taäke your hat off, Tom, can't 'ee?"

But he need not have feared. Kitty Walters had no intention of deserting him, having already remarked to a bosom friend, "I doän't mind un a-walkin' out wi' me"—which

was, in local phraseology, superlative satisfaction at having him attached to her. And, could he have known it, the remark on "puttin' up the banns" was not at all distasteful to her mind, though, of course, she knew that "walkin' out" was one of those preliminary stages which, though lasting even for a year or two, might always be terminated any day by either party, and did not necessarily lead to proposal of marriage.

The "ting-tang" bell began to ring five minutes before the time of service. Paäson came out of his private gate from his Vicarage garden and crossed over to the church. A silence fell upon the group. He nodded a "good-evening" to them and received sundry hat touches in return. They were always respectful, if taciturn, in his presence. He, having mastered to a certain extent the ignorance of rural psychology which he possessed when he first came into the village, knew better than to say to them, "Coming to church, lads?" and passed on.

To a stranger it would have appeared that they did *not* intend to go to church. But within a minute of the hour they went in—altogether, some of them giggling.

Not silently. Their nailed boots clattered loudly on the tiles as they made their way

to the back of the building, grinning at friends in pews, and huddled themselves in a body into seats with much scraping of feet and whispering.

But it was not scorn of the sacred building that made them behave like this. They would not own it, but, in reality, the "bloods" were *shy!*

Päason heard them tumbling into church, and smiled at a recollection. Years before, when he was new to the parish and country life, the "bloods" had suddenly, and without apparent reason, deserted the church on Sunday evenings. The back of the building was empty. Moreover, he soon learned that they had betaken themselves in a body to the chapel. And there they went for several weeks in succession.

Paäson was puzzled. While conscious in his own mind that everyone has a right to attend the place of worship of his choice, he wanted to know *why*? It occurred to him to state the case to a brother cleric who had had many years' experience of the peculiar ways of village life. To him he went.

"Have you said anything to them about it?" asked the wise old clergyman.

"No—not a word."

"Have you spoken to anyone else in your

parish about it, or shown in any way that you're upset?"

"No."

The other man rubbed his hands and smiled.

"Good!" he ejaculated, "you're all right, then. They're only trying it on with you—that's all. If they knew they'd annoyed you they'd boast of having 'got the better o' Paäson,' and probably you'd never have much influence with them. But you just keep quiet and you'll find they'll all come back in a few weeks."

And they did.

Such was the way of the "bloods." But it would be difficult to trace the psychology that led to it. Once there was a sudden "strike." Michaelmas came round and, without exception, all the "bloods" in the village refused to be "hired on" for the year by the farmers. They gave no reason, they asked for no advance of wages, they made no complaints, they took no notice of remonstrances. They simply struck work and paraded the village in idle groups for weeks. No one ever knew why. It is a question whether they knew the reason themselves.

On week-day evenings the "bloods" assembled after work. There were favourite corners. Sometimes o' dark nights they congregated like moths outside the village shop,

making remarks at the going-in and coming-out of customers. flattening their noses against the window to ascertain what was being purchased.

At other times, also on dark nights, there was never a trace of them. But they were there—rubbing shoulders against a wall round the corner, hidden behind trees. An occasional guffaw betrayed them—a sudden stampede of heavy feet going "up street" told of their whereabouts.

And, in the silence, they observed all things. No one could venture abroad unnoticed. Movements were carefully noted and discussed in undertones. There was always a sense of secrecy about the "bloods."

Occasionally there was a bit of harmless horse-play. A gate would be removed from its hinges and flung in the ditch; a newly painted fence would be daubed over with tar; flowers would mysteriously disappear from gardens. These were deeds of daring—rarely found out. There was a certain honour among them, and the blank ignorance of "I dunno" was generally forthcoming in reply to individual inquiries.

The "bloods" rarely "went to pub." Outdoor assemblies suited them best. And they hung together—coming together and going to-

gether. In the eternal round of village life no novelty, sacred or secular, lasted long. A miniature rifle club drew them, at first, in all their numbers. The second year the "bloods" fought shy of it and it had to be closed down. Paäson's Bible-class shared the same fate.

The "bloods" played no organised games. True, there was a cricket club, but the Captain had a rare job to get a team together in the few desultory matches of the season, and the "bloods" rarely helped him. In the winter they might occasionally kick a football about the play-close—all against all—but they never attempted to form themselves into a club, and resented the attempts of Paäson and others who tried to do so.

Final detachment from the "bloods" came about either by advancing into the twenties or the putting up of the banns. Fred Moorcock and Kitty Walters stepped awkwardly into Paäson's study—the parish clerk was away from home that Saturday night, or they never would have ventured to call at the Vicarage. Kitty Walters led the way and the conversation.

"Well, Fred?" asked Paäson, a slightly puzzled look on his face.

To which Kitty replied,

"Please, sir, we wants our banns put up to-morrow marnin'."

Paäson offered his congratulations, dipped his pen in the ink to take down their full Christian names, hesitated, looked puzzled again, and then said,

"Are *you* going to marry her, Fred?"

Fred hugged his hat more closely to his knees, beamed amiably, and replied,

"Ess, sir, I be."

"But," said Paäson, turning to Kitty, "I thought you've been 'walking out' with *Tom?*"

Kitty blushed slightly.

"So I were, sir," she admitted.

"I—er—I don't quite understand," said Paäson. "What will your brother say, Fred?"

To which Fred expounded his chivalry. It was a long speech, but he got through it.

"'Tis like this, sir. Tom's bin a-walkin' out wi' Kitty this two year, and now he's throwed her over for Jane Bidmead. I told un he were a fool, but he 'ood have his own waäy. And I didn't see as Kitty should be disappointed, so I asks her if she'd have I instead—and she says she 'ool."

"Dear me," exclaimed Paäson; "that's rather a strange proceeding. What have *you* to say to it, Kitty?"

Kitty glanced at her Fred.

"I doän't mind un," she said calmly.

Whereupon the "bloods" knew Fred Moorcock as one of their fraternity no longer.

THE CONCERT

IV

THE CONCERT

THE schoolroom was the only place available for public meetings or entertainments. Desks had to be dragged about, tops turned down and formed into rows of seats. Jim Stacey, the village carpenter, came in to erect the "stage," which consisted of four large deal slabs set up on trestles. For which duty Jim charged the modest sum of two shillings—including taking it down. Paraffin lamps had to be lighted and properly arranged. Jim Stacey was also the recognised money-taker at the door, which office he performed gratuitously.

Entertainments usually had an object connected with lucre. Funds were wanted for church purposes: repairs to the organ; new hymn-books for the choir; new lamps in place of old ones that dripped oil and anointed the heads of the faithful.

Or for general village purposes: a bathchair for the use of the sick and infirm; another seat

in the play-close; instruments for the band. The receipts were generally modest. Three pounds constituted a huge haul, and gave food for a week's gossip.

"Entertainments" were of various kinds. Magic-lanterns, concerts, attempts at theatricals, and the like. Even unto whist-drives and dances.

Magic-lanterns, however, went out of fashion. A travelling cinema put up a tent for a week in the village, and the "bloods" and others paid twopence to see "living pictures." And that killed the ordinary lantern show.

Audiences varied—according to the state of the moon or the personality of the performers. Calendars were generally consulted with true Shakespearian instinct in order to fix a concert for a night when the moon was full. And as to performers, well, Little Marpleton talent came first and foremost, and the old songs were easy favourites.

Paäson had his first lesson on public taste shortly after taking up his abode in the village. He had a friend who was celebrated in elocutionary skill, who gave "Evenings with Shakespeare," or Dickens, or other great authors, which drew crowded audiences in towns; and his friend, who particularly fancied himself on

his achievements, came to give his celebrated "Evening with Charles Dickens."

Paäson boomed him previously, published a preliminary notice in the Parish Magazine, talked about him, and otherwise prepared the way. But, alas! not a score of people came to hear him, and after paying his railway expenses the profit was minus several shillings.

Paäson asked why. And they told him plainly.

"Well, sir, 't'oodn't be likely we should ha' come to hear un. First place, 'a was a straänger, and we doän't know nought about un. Second place, there en't ara one in the village who ever heärd about this 'ere Chawles Dickens; we dunno who 'a *be!*"

For the next "entertainment" he fell back upon local talent. The room was packed, and the general opinion was: "I enjoyed maself a smaärt lot up at t' school larst night. 'Twas worth hearin'."

The farmers and their belongings occupied the front seats. The "bloods" congregated at the back, occupying window-seats, or standing on the broken desk that was specially provided for them. They were the "gods," and they knew it.

"Miss Rose Taplin" (on the programme) greeted as "Rosy" when she appeared on the

platform by one of the oldest of the "bloods," led off with a "pianoforte solo," played with a strict regard to time (and they helped her with boot-tapping), and an equally strict disregard of all expression. She stayed to accompany her sister, "Miss Gladys Taplin," who, being arrayed in evening dress with a bouquet, was greeted with a subdued "Oh! look at her!" from the back of the room. She was exceedingly sentimental in her choice of a song—abjectly, miserably sentimental—but enjoyed herself immensely.

The family of Taplin contributed greatly to the programme, and Henry, brother of the above young ladies, brought down the house. They knew he was up to something directly he faced them, for he winked deliberately and pointed straight at his father, who was seated near the front. Now, Job Taplin bore a great local reputation. Fruit-dealer by profession, he was known as the laziest man in the village, and was always to be found sauntering about with his hands in his pockets, or lounging in the taproom of the Blue Lion mornings and afternoons. The rest of the family were the workers. He was the drone. And his son meant to get his own back that night. He had lighted upon a comic song, the refrain of which was:

"We all go to work but Fa-a-a-ther,
We all go to work but Fa-a-a-ther.
Mother turns a mangle, sister washes clothes,
Brother Tom's a gardener; he digs and rakes and hoes.
I do all the odd jobs, and things that Father don't.
We *all* work but Father—he drinks his
Beer and *won't!*"

It wasn't the song he had told Paäson he was going to sing; but then, he had his reasons. There was a terrific encore, and the "bloods" took up the chorus vociferously. Even Job himself, who was ever a meek man and bore no malice, shook his shoulders with laughter, turned to his neighbour, and said, in a husky voice, as if explaining a problem:

"Th' young beggar means *me*, darn un!"

Weeks afterwards, whenever you heard, from the top of the village, the words of that very palpable chorus,

"We all go to work but Fa-a-a-ther!"

you were sure that Job Taplin was somewhere in evidence, sauntering with hands in pocket.

When Ezra Padge mounted the platform and stood, nervously, facing the audience, one great cry greeted him instantly. There were shouts of "Clementina!" "Clementina!" It was the only song he had ever been known to sing, either in public or privately. He had sung it, year in and year out, at every concert in

which he had ever taken part. If he had essayed any other song the audience would have been bitterly disappointed, for he was associated with nothing else in their minds. Stale? Not a bit of it. Wasn't he one of themselves, doing what he had always done, and was ever expected to do? They came to hear him sing "Clementina."

"Dunno as I ever heered Ezra in better form," said one to his neighbour. "He do know how to sing that song, ah, and I ought to know—scores o' times I've listened to un. An-core! An-core!"

Followed Fred Moorcock, the recognised comedian of the community. And Fred possessed accessories, none of the least of them being a yellow wig, a false nose, and a green umbrella. Fred always "dressed up," and that, in itself, was sure to bring the house down. Rapturous whistling greeted him from the "bloods" as he bounded on to the stage, dressed in a pair of white trousers, an old red huntsman's coat, and a wide-awake hat—nose and wig properly adjusted, and umbrella over his shoulder. It was a slightly incongruous costume for "The Farmer's Boy," but that didn't matter, especially as there was a good old rollicking chorus that everyone knew—and sung accordingly:

"To be a varmer's boy-oy-oy!
To be a varmer's boy!"

Of course, the programme was not complete without a recitation from Miss Bradley, and a song from William Budd. Miss Bradley was a refined young lady—always refined, especially when serving behind the counter of one of the little village shops. She added taste and literature to the programme by reciting, with four distinct gestures at intervals, Browning's "Herve Riel." Not that she read Browning. It was in one of her shilling books of recitations under the heading of "Serious." She always recited serious pieces. The audience knew it, and subsided into a melancholy silence accordingly. They applauded her when she had finished, admiring her powers of memory more than the plot of the piece—which was puzzling to an inland audience. She bowed gracefully and gave place to William Budd.

There stood William Budd, in best suit and big buttonhole, smiling the most genial of smiles all over his broad, good-humoured Saxon face. Just the very personification of a jolly rustic about to sing a jolly song with a jolly good chorus. You anticipated "Come, landlord, fill the flowing bowl," all the more so as you knew William Budd was just the man to appreciate a flowing bowl.

But—with the first note of the prelude to the accompaniment, William's smile began slowly to die away. He fixed his gaze rigidly on one particular point in the roof, from which he never removed it once, and commenced to sing, slowly and with appalling sadness:

"The night our little Jessie died
We watched around her bed.
She closed her eyes and gently sighed,
And her pure spirit fled!"

At the proper juncture he called out loudly, "Chorus, please!" and, with his forefinger raised, beat time in dirge-like slowness, while all sang with great relish and sentiment:

"On Jessie's grave the green grass grows,
Beneath that grass she's sleeping.
We'll leave her there in calm repose,
Her mem'ry ever keeping!"

It was solemn to the extreme. At its close William's face relaxed into a broad and happy smile once more; he bowed awkwardly, announcing, according to the custom, the title of the song he had just given them, "Little Jessie's Grave."

The applause was subdued. Gladys Taplin was seen to dab her eyes with her handkerchief, and Peter Hedger, the most accomplished oath collector and disburser in the village, said to his neighbour,

"That's the sort o' song *I* likes. Sims to do 'ee good, somehow."

William Budd made his way to the door and said to Jim Stacey:

"I shall have time for a pint up at the Blue Lion afore the next un I reckon, Jim."

"What's the next un, William? Goin' to gi' us, 'Mother's with the angels now'?"

"Ah—thought about it."

"Couldn't do better, William. They all likes that."

Later on in the season a concert was given by some of Farmer Beechy's friends—who came out from Derringford. The *Derringford Gazette* had had a column about their last performance there, which was crowded.

But there was only a moderate-sized audience in the school. And, in the interval, the absent "bloods" could be heard somewhere in the village singing lustily:

"We all go to work but Fa-a-ther!"

And those who did go gave as the verdict, "Ah! 'Twas pretty middlin'. But they weren't a patch on William Budd—or Ezra's 'Clementina,' neither!"

MATTERS OF MONEY

V

MATTERS OF MONEY

Miss Carey, the "lady from Lunnon" who rented a cottage for week-ends and wrote articles on country life, called to consult Paäson. On matters temporal, not spiritual. She wanted his advice, having been, so she told him, treated with brazen dishonesty by one of his parishioners, and by her tone of voice rather implying that he was personally responsible for the morality of individual villagers.

In the orchard at the back of her cottage were sundry fruit-trees, bearing a superabundance as far as she was concerned. Whereupon she had acted upon the advice of William Budd, who had, on her authority, mentioned the matter to Job Taplin in the taproom of the Blue Lion. Job, with hands firmly buried in trouser-pockets, had called on Miss Carey, leisurely inspected the plum-trees in question, and finally made her a bid:

"I'll give 'ee one pun ten shillin's for 'em, miss."

Miss Carey, who, in spite of her assumed knowledge of matters agricultural, had no idea of the value of the fruit, had accepted the offer, being assured by Job that they "'oodn't fetch a penny more." Whether that was strictly true was not the question.

"Very well, miss, Fred shall come round and begin a-gatherin' on 'em this afternoon. I ain't got the money about me now, but I'll bring it along. I allus pays cash down."

He had departed, still with hands in pockets, given Fred his orders, and returned to the Blue Lion to have a second morning glass on the strength of his unwonted exertions. Fred had taken round an array of "half-sieve" baskets and duly stripped the trees.

Then came the settlement, and therein lay Miss Carey's indignant cause of complaint. Job Taplin had called, for once taken his hands out of his pockets, and counted out exactly twenty-seven shillings—nor would he give her a penny more—protesting that such was the bargain agreed upon.

"It isn't the value of the three shillings," explained Miss Carey, "but the fact that I hate having advantage taken of me—and the barefaced dishonesty of the man. He took

care to take away all the plums first, and then deliberately and openly went back on his word and cheated me. I hope you preach on the eighth commandment sometimes to these people!"

Paäson, for the life of him, could not help retorting:

"If you came to church, Miss Carey, you'd know what I preached about! But with regard to Job Taplin. Did he offer to pay you cash down?"

"Yes," replied Miss Carey, "he did. That's just the point of it. He distinctly offered me thirty shillings *cash down*."

"That's it, then," said Paäson, "you see, it's the custom in all our 'cash down' transactions for the seller to pay back a certain percentage to the buyer. In fruit-dealing two shillings in every pound is the amount. It's the understood thing."

Miss Carey frowned and tapped her parasol impatiently on the study floor.

"But how was I to know that? He never told me. He simply led me to understand that I was going to receive thirty shillings."

"No," replied Paäson, with a smile, "that isn't *his* view of it. He assumed that you knew exactly what he meant."

But how *could* I?"

Paäson smiled.

"They don't *tell* you these things," he tried to explain; "you only find them out by living among the people. You see, in *their* eyes, you're dreadfully ignorant if you don't know all their ways by instinct. Job hadn't the slightest intention of cheating you. And I expect his view of the transaction is that you tried to get the better of *him*, Miss Carey!"

Miss Carey rose to go, but the explanation only half-satisfied her. Subsequently there was an article in one of the weeklies on the dishonesty of the rustic mind and the failure of the Church in influencing village morality. A political nonconformist publication quoted it triumphantly.

As a matter of fact all "cash down" transactions were sacred. In sales of cattle, pigs, or sheep, for example, it was the same. Cash was paid down on the nail, less commission; drovers getting a shilling or so out of the bargain, and no receipts were ever given or even asked for. In a neighbouring village, remote in the Downs, stagnant as to life on the great majority of days, four or five times a year there were great sheep sales. Droves came from every direction—from the far west, from the south, from all quarters.

Auctioneers hied them thither, farmers and dealers with big loose coats, pockets containing fat wallets, drove or rode towards the village, or alighted at the tiny station two and a half miles distant. Sleepy inns woke to life, providing heavy meals of beef and mutton and bread and cheese, washed down by much liquor. Shepherds and drovers shouted, sheep-dogs barked, great pens were filled with prospective mutton, rams were congregated to be sold singly or in small lots for breeding purposes.

Thousands of pounds changed hands. Greasy cheque-books were unfolded in bar-parlours and filled in by men with greasy garments and unwashed hands with sums of three or even four figures. The fat wallets were unbuckled and rolls of crumpled notes produced; gold and silver were counted in handfuls on to pot-marked deal tables in taprooms.

But never was a receipt for any payment, however large, given or expected. These were "cash down" transactions—settled in immemorial custom. Primitive, perhaps, but binding, in the strict code of honour which so often attaches itself to primitive people when dealing with each other.

Business transactions were based on shrewdness, but were not scientific. Shopkeepers,

of course, kept books; fruit-dealers manipulated odd scraps of pencilled jottings when making out a bill; the landlord of the Blue Lion delineated—with bits of chalk—hieroglyphics only known to himself. But with rare exceptions farmers kept no accounts of any kind —their usual method of checking receipts and expenditure being simply their bank book. If asked how they could tell which department of farming meant loss and which meant gain, they just replied that they couldn't tell and left it at that. The pass-book from the bank showed a tendency towards an overdrawn account—and rents due, too. The problem was soon solved. "Sheenin'" was soon in evidence, a rick or two thrashed out, and the produce sold o' market day. Or, if the bank book showed a "smaärtish balance in hand, 't'oodn't be amiss to buy a few sheep and let 'em feed off of forty acre field."

Smaller merchants referred to teapot or stocking to see how they stood. With them there was often a prejudice about letting money go out of sight—over a bank counter. Stephen Finch, watercress grower and fruit-dealer, was persuaded to depart from the ways of himself and his ancestors, and to open an account at the local bank at Derringford.

He did so, returning home with a thirty-leaved cheque book. There were sundry payments to be made: rent, repairs to his cart, the price of a couple of orchards of standing fruit, and so on. Laboriously he wrote out cheques—a little bit conscious that it was a method of disbursement to be proud of. He kept no accounts and had no time to go seven miles for his pass-book—if he knew he possessed one.

Then came a letter, one day, from the manager of the bank, pointing out that he had overdrawn his account and that they couldn't honour his cheques until the necessary deficiency was made up. And Stephen Finch went into the village in great wrath, denouncing that bank right and left. He entered the Blue Lion, where several of the "reglars" were congregated, and held forth indignantly.

"That bank en't no good of at all," he exclaimed. "They're a lot o' thievin', lyin' scoundrels, and I 'oodn't advise ara one of 'ee to have nought to do wi' 'em. I be goin' to ask 'em for my money back. Here they goes and ses they wun't pay no moäre o' my cheques! Why, they gi' ma *thutty* cheques, an' I got *eleven of 'em left still!* Lookee!"

And he put down his cheque book on the

table for examination. Several of them shook their heads dubiously and said "Ah!" sorrowfully. William Budd expressed a strong opinion.

"I never did think much o' they banks, Steve. They be allus a bustin' or summat. Once them inside 'em lays hold o' other people's money, stands to reason they're tempted to keep it—and often *do*," he added emphatically.

The landlord endeavoured to explain matters, but Stephen Finch continued to appeal to the evidence of his eleven unused cheques and refused to be persuaded.

It was pure thrift that prevented old Matthew Keen from opening a bank account. Matthew was a small holder, a worried-looking, anxious, hard-working man, just able to make both ends meet by working harder than any hired labourer. Sheer economy and stern self-denial had enabled him to save his little bit of capital, that capital which is so essential for anyone who essays to make a living out of a tiny farm, which is so little taken account of by town-bred speakers at election times who know nothing about crop failures, the selling price of mangel-wurzels, or the outlay required for seeds and renewal of implements.

So Matthew Keen had saved and saved,

knowing the value of every individual penny. And it was just because he knew the value of a single penny that he refused to open a banking account.

"'T'ood cost ma a penny every time I wrote out a cheque. And I can't affoord to be a-throwin' awaäy o' pennies. That be a casalty job, I reckon."

But, one day, an extraordinary thing happened. Matthew Keen and his wife both being out and their cottage locked, someone burglariously entered. It was almost unheard of. Not that the village was free from thieving. For its shame, it was *not!* Whole trees of ripe plums or pears would be stripped in a single night, choice flowers would disappear out of gardens, the whole of the little library, presented by a friend of Paäson's to the working men's club, was gradually removed—volume by volume. But these purloinings happened in public places, whereas in Matthew's case a dwelling-house had been forced open.

He discovered it at once on his return. The lock was broken and several things were missing. He rushed up the narrow stairs and into the bedroom. There were traces of the thief there—drawers lying open. He kneeled down in front of the fireplace, put his trembling

hand up the chimney, and brought forth a little old bag.

"Thank God!" he ejaculated; "they en't took *that!*"

Carefully, a little apprehensively, he untied the string of the bag and counted the contents.

"Eighty-one pund. 'Tis all there!"

The very next day Matthew Keen entered the bank at Derringford, went up to the counter, untied his bag, and, pouring its contents out before the astonished cashier, exclaimed:

"There be eighty pound. Taäke care of un for ma, wull 'ee, pleäse!"

"But, look here——"

"'Tis all right, sir. They be good uns, but I en't goin' to kip 'em at hoäme no moäre, lookee. And I'll taäke a set o' them 'ere cheques, if you pleäse, sir."

It was with difficulty that it was explained to him that this method of opening an account by a person quite unknown at the bank was scarcely in order. However, being market day, he soon found a farmer—a customer of the bank—to introduce him properly.

He's all right," exclaimed the latter, to the bank manager, into whose sanctum they were shown; "honest as the day. I've dealt with him these forty years, eh, Matthew? I don't wonder at your taking to banking your money

after what I heard this morning. But 'twill be a penny every time you draw a cheque, Matthew, ho, ho, ho!"

Matthew Keen shook his head sadly.

"I knows 'tis expensive," he said, "but what else be I to do?"

A VETERAN

VI

A VETERAN

PAÄSON went over to the next village to attend the funeral of the old rector there—indeed, all the paäsons in the neighbourhood were gathered together to do reverence to the memory of the oldest of their fraternity for many miles. He had exceeded the allotted span by a quarter of a century, in harness almost to the very last.

Sixty years rector of a tiny Downland village! Sixty years! There were old men of seventy, leaning on their sticks that day, discussing him after the funeral, and saying, "Ah! He give me one or two rare good hidin's when I were a boy!" Generation upon generation he had been with them—almost a part of hoary Time himself.

Of the old régime, of course. White mutton-chop whiskers, steady, compressed lips and piercing bright eyes. Fond of his own way, and a bit of a martinet. It was part of his character that he took the law into his own

hands in his earlier days and thrashed recalcitrant youth, and they never bore him malice.

Within a few years of his death he was riding his nag over the Downs, bolt upright in his saddle. Towards the end he was content to drive in his trap—but nobody was ever allowed to drive him. He was always lord and master in his own house, and out in the parish.

So they gathered together to lay him to rest, and old John Hall, the sexton, slowly rattled down earth on the coffin-top as soon as they left the churchyard. John Hall, sexton parochially, in his private capacity had been the Rector's gardener for forty years, and was nearly as old as the master for whom he was doing the last grim service.

He paused in his work to take a last look at the remaining uncovered patch of the coffin.

"Ah," he murmured, "thee wast an orkard man at toimes, but I shall miss 'ee, all the saäme, maäster. Thee warn't a bad un, all things reckoned up. I moaght 'a done worse nor 'a staäyed wi' 'ee."

And he spit on his hands, took up his shovel, and the earth went crashing down into the grave. It was a rough requiem for the old master, but it meant a deal more than his manner of expressing it.

He was right. He would miss the old master. They knew each other so well that they could even quarrel familiarly. Which they did. There was the famous scene overheard the other side of the garden wall by a passer-by, and retailed accordingly in the taproom for weeks afterwards, the famous, if not exactly subtle, repartee—or whatever you like to call it—that John Hall had made to his master. The subject of discussion was the planting out of bedding flowers, and the Rector had evidently been giving contradictory directions. For what John Hall was heard to say was this:

"Look here, maäster, first you says geraniums wi' a border o' lobelias, then you says calcylarium 'stead o' lobelias, and then you goes and says pansies. Wot th' hell *do* 'ee want?"

"What did the Rector say to that?" the eavesdropper was asked.

"Didn't sim to me as if 'a said nothin', 'cept 'John, John.' What could 'a saäy? 'A couldn't swear back, bein' a paäson, could 'a?"

"No," was the response. "Reckon John Hall had the best of un there!"

Perhaps John Hall considered he still had the best of his old master, as he shovelled the earth upon his coffin. He felt in the proud position of survivor.

The old Rector had lived his life in the village very quietly with the people, and yet greatly apart from the people. Of course, he sympathised with them in their various troubles; of course, beef tea and milk puddings had been going forth from the Rectory for over half a century, and half-crowns emanating from the Rector's waistcoat pocket during an equal length of time. He was kindly enough, and they liked him, and were used to him, but it was a question whether he understood their point of view, or ever knew the changing spirit of the times. He was so simple and guileless. It is doubtful whether he ever understood that the open Bible on old Widow Bond's table, prominent whenever he paid a visit (she could see him coming up the path) had any connection with the equivalent of thirty pieces of copper nestling in readiness in his pocket, anymore than he was aware when he was explaining political questions to his two churchwardens that they judged him exceedingly out of date when they discussed him afterwards.

His life was very sheltered, remote. He rejoiced in one central, great possession—or, rather, the possession of the church—a bit of Saxon wall still intact in the structure. No one was ever brought by friends to the Rectory without being told, very soon, "We have a

Saxon wall in the church here. Quite genuine." Hundreds and hundreds of times he had taken people through the little door from his garden into the churchyard, and into the church, to see that Saxon wall. Thousands of times he had stood upon the same spot, describing in the same words, that Saxon wall. Half a dozen or more Sundays every year he brought into his sermon a reference to it, so that everyone in the village knew that the church had a Saxon wall, but didn't care one little jot about it, and probably couldn't have pointed out whereabouts it was.

"'T'oodn't be like the Rector if 'a didn't saäy summat about that 'ere old wall in his sarmons sometoimes. 'A be that fond o' that wall, you wouldn't hardly believe it!"

But his calm life was not without its adventurous side. He was wont to make great discoveries. And whenever he made a great discovery he imparted the same to his people, whom he invariably assumed to be in total ignorance of the facts upon which he had so wondrously stumbled.

Thus, three of the great discoveries of his latter years were long-distance express trains, electric light in dwelling-houses, and picture postcards.

It was not that he had never travelled by

train; of course he had. But, somehow or other, it was not till he was well in the eighties that he had ever taken a journey by a train that ran 150 miles without a stop.

And the Sunday after he returned he preached about his great discovery.

"Dear friends," he said, in the course of his sermon, "try to imagine it. Derringford is five miles from this village. *Thirty times* that distance, my friends, and without stopping! Or imagine going to Derringford and back *fifteen times in succession* and never stopping at either end. I thought of you—I thought of you all. I said to myself as we whirled along, 'I wish the dear people of Camford could be here to experience it for themselves.' The works of man are truly marvellous."

From this he made comparisons with the more wonderful works of God, but, somehow or other, the general impression on the rustic mind was that, when it came to a matter of express trains, the Almighty was considerably out of it.

It was while at the seaside, where he had taken a house for a six weeks' holiday, that he discovered the electric light. As he carefully explained while visiting one of his better-class parishioners on his return, "One came

into the room and found, just inside the door, a little sort of knob in the wall—quite small. One pressed this knob, and in a moment—*in a moment*, Mrs. Findlay" (and he leaned forward in his chair), "the whole room was flooded with a brilliant light. Wonderful! Wonderful!"

It was quite possible that he might have been in rooms lighted by electricity before, but the point of the discovery was that he had never turned it on himself—or seen it turned on previous to this occasion.

The discovery of the picture postcards was also made while on holiday, but he did not wait until his return before imparting it. He sent packets of postcards to his two churchwardens and several other favoured parishioners, with covering letters on which he wrote carefully: "You will find a space reserved for the address, also another space of similar size. On the latter you can write any communication you desire. You then affix a *halfpenny* stamp in the small space provided for it, and drop the card into a letter-box. They strike me as combining beauty and usefulness with extreme simplicity."

And when he came back he made diligent inquiries as to whether the cards had been used according to his directions, with the air

of one who believed himself to be a benefactor to the ignorant. And, indeed, in his simplicity, he *did* believe this.

Tough old man as he was, he had to begin to go downhill at last. When he was in the nineties folks looked at him as he trudged "up street," shook their heads, and said:

"Ah, Paäson begins to look oldish, 'a do. Not so spry as 'a were thutty years ago. How time do fly, to be sure! Paäson's a-gettin' on, I reckon!"

He was "a-gettin' on." But it was a long time before he would allow it to be so. He was ever orkard, was the Rector. At length, slowly and reluctantly, he agreed with those who studied his health that it might be a good thing to engage a curate—to fall back upon. He had no idea, to begin with, so it was supposed, that a curate would *do* anything except act as a stand-by.

Still, he was in no hurry. He went about it leisurely, but at last did engage a curate. It was about time. Several times he had found it a great effort to get through all his Sunday services and preach twice. Time was laying his inexorable hand upon him.

So, the curate came. But the old Rector, having had his own way for sixty years, had no

idea of the modern relationship between incumbent and curate. So, when the latter preached his first sermon—on the Unjust Steward, that being the subject of the day's gospel—the old man, unaccustomed to hear sermons preached from his own pulpit, sat with hand to his ear in great attention, and frowned more and more ominously as the sermon proceeded.

Scarcely had the curate finished—he was still in the pulpit—before the Rector was on his feet, facing the congregation, with a view to public criticism.

"It is most unfortunate," he said, "that in the sermon you have just listened to—which in many respects was an admirable one—that Mr. Langton omitted to mention that the 'lord' in the parable is spelt with a small 'l', and does not mean our Saviour. Our Saviour, of course, would not have commended the unjust steward. It is a great pity Mr. Langton did not explain this to you!"

Then he gave out the hymn, and the unfortunate curate came down from the pulpit. He was, probably, the only perturbed person in the church. The Rector certainly was not perturbed, and the congregation were so accustomed to colloquial and peculiar announcements from him, that they took it all as a

matter of course. And *he* was only trying to save their orthodoxy!

So the hand of time pressed more and more relentlessly upon him, pressed till it did its work and released him for ever. And so they gathered round to lay his bones to rest near the Saxon wall he loved so well.

John Hall filled up the grave—a long mound on the top. He patted this into shape with his shovel and looked at it critically.

"Th' old master was allus partic'lar about finishin' on 'em up," he murmured.

A few more pats with the shovel; a further inspection:

"Ah! I reckon 'a 'oodn't ha' found much wrong wi' *that*. 'T'ood ha' pleased un, nicely."

He stood there for a moment, a sigh escaping him.

"God rest his soul," he muttered, uncovering his head as he did so.

He picked up the wreaths that were lying about and arranged them, one after another, on the top of the grave. His handiwork finished, he stood gazing down on it.

"Shan't never see he no moäre—leastways, not about these paärts. If I ever gets to heaven, please God, I'll find un there, I reckon."

He took his coat from a neighbouring tomb-

stone, where he had hung it, put it on, and exclaimed:

"'Tis dry work—fillin' up a graäve this weather." Then he tucked his shovel under his arm and, with sad, heavy, slow steps, took his way towards the Barley Mow.

THE MEADOW

VII

THE MEADOW

"A sense of mystery the spirit daunted
And said, as plain as whisper in the ear,
'The place is haunted.'"

So sang Thomas Hood in one of the most imaginative poems ever written. There was nothing tangible to go upon, the story of a possible crime had to be evolved in the brain. No ghost or other apparition was *seen*—only there was the mysterious atmosphere of the old house, an atmosphere that appalled the spirit by its very lack of anything real and material.

Who shall ever fathom this atmosphere of the mysterious, especially when the mysterious takes the sense of an appalling gloom, and the silence of it penetrates the soul and makes one shudder? You sometimes find it in a grim old house, and you are not entirely surprised, because you believe, perhaps, that the psychology of bygone inmates who dwelt therein still hovers in the dark corners and passages, still affects the cramped surroundings. But when you find this atmosphere out in God's open country, where the sunshine of years ought to

burn up all the gloom, and the fresh winds of heaven ought to sweep away all dark mysteries —*then* the sense of a great horror, never to be solved, has you in its keeping and you shudder.

Such a place was the meadow—absolutely separated, in its dreadful atmosphere, from all its sweet surroundings.

You walked away from the village that clustered at the foot of the great open Downs, walked along a fair path, bordered on either side by golden wheat glittering in the sunlight, waving in ripples before the breeze, the joy and the freedom of nature entering your soul. Anon you came to a stream, at the farther edge of the broad field, crossed by a little wooden bridge, and you paused a moment to take a backward glance. Across the cornland stood the trees and red and thatched roofs of the village, blue smoke curling upwards. Beyond, the Downs, yellow unto harvest on the lower slopes, green up to the outline against the sky, with the dark patches of copses and the straggling sentinels of solitary trees. Faintly there came the sounds of life—a dog barking, a cock proclaiming his dunghill pre-eminence, the clatter of a reaping machine in the farther field, the cry of a yokel shouting to his mate. The little stream

beneath you swirled and rippled. There was no disturbing element. You felt at peace with the world and with yourself.

And then — you crossed the stream and entered, over a stile in a gap through the surrounding hedge, the meadow.

It was only an ordinary meadow. Quite small, and of irregular shape. A big, thick, tall, uncut hedge surrounded it — a hedge that looked as if it had never been cut since it was first planted. Great straggling tangles of blackberry brambles hung from the hedge and crept forward over the grass, laden with fruit which no children ever gathered. For, somehow or other, you never saw any of the village children in that meadow. You could not have fancied them there. It was never meant to be a place for the games and laughter of the young.

The path lay across the meadow from corner to corner, a thin line of brown, hardened earth, between the green. But the green was not beautiful. There was something repulsive about it. The surface was uneven. Clumps of rushes grew in the hollows; moles had thrown up innumerable heaps on the more highly raised surface. The grass was rank and coarse, growing here sparingly, there in great tussocks.

Directly you entered the meadow there was a great change—a sudden silence and chill fell upon you. No matter how fresh and sweet the breeze outside, whether the great hedge had anything to do with it or not, there was a *stillness*, the sense of a great stagnation, powerfully oppressive. The sun still shone, but seemed to have lost its warmth; the very light seemed thinner, unreal.

Stillness. Coldness. Dimness. You were oppressed by the sense of all three.

But this was not all.

As you slowly crossed the meadow there was borne in upon you another sense, an awful, burdening sense.

Something seemed to be present. *Something* quite distinct from the stillness, the coldness, and the dimness. *Something* that was quite intangible, and yet *real*. *Something* that you felt had its habitation in that meadow, an utterly unholy presence that made the place an abode of unutterable wrong and wickedness. It was not the mere stillness that oppressed you, not the mere sense of coldness that sent a shiver through you, not the dimness that made you look questioningly to see if the sun were still shining, but the appalling mystery of a living, indefinable Something that walked beside you, that resented your presence there,

that even threatened you—Something unhallowed, evil, *lost!*

The horror increased in intensity as you crossed the meadow and drew near the outlet on the farther side. It seemed to culminate just there, as if it *must*, at last, become visible, as if there were no longer any escape from it.

At this outlet you stepped into a lane that ran parallel with the top of the meadow. But not a lane that you felt ought to exist at all: a lane that was dark and weird, overhung with tree branches so sheltered that not a leaf moved, a lane that was grassy and damp and mysterious, and as horrible in its atmosphere as the meadow itself, a lane that never seemed to be designed for the use of mortal man—that led nowhere.

Once across this lane, into the field beyond, and the whole surroundings once more seemed different. The breeze blew freshly, the sun glowed with genial warmth, the light increased, and, what was the greatest relief of all, you felt you were *alone* once more, and that all was fair and good under the canopy of God's heaven—the weird, evil thing was left behind and could never escape from that hedge-enclosed meadow and gloomy lane to follow you farther.

These were the facts. There was no ex-

planation of them. No doubt those who dabble in the occult would have told you all sorts of reasons—the presence of one of those mysterious, half-developed entities know as elementals, the psychological effects of some bygone and forgotten crime, the haunting of an unshrived and disembodied spirit. Each to his choice. But there was no local tradition of any cause or event. The whole thing was a mystery. Of the imagination, perhaps, but still—a mystery.

Only the lane that ran along the top of that horrible meadow was commonly, and effectively, known as "Cut Throat Lane!" And place-names generally have their origin in *something!* Something real and tangible.

THE SAINT'S MOUND

VIII

THE SAINT'S MOUND

It was really a Romano-British tumulus standing alone on the very top of the high Downs overlooking the village. Somehow or other a solitary fir-tree had become planted on its summit and had grown, beaten by the great winds that came sweeping over the expanse, into a twisted, weird shape, that seemed to stand there like a broken-down sentry on lonely outpost duty.

They called the tumulus the "Saint's Mound," because they said, what was very possible, that the apostle of Christianity to the downland country away back in the seventh century had preached his first sermon, standing upon this very eminence.

It may have been so. Anyhow the saint in question, a missionary from sunny climes, had landed somewhere on our southern coasts, pushing northward to the scene of his labours. And the tumulus stood close beside what used to be the ancient trackway to the south. Long since disused, but even yet at the end of

a very dry summer you could trace a narrow track through the corn, where it was stunted in growth, and they told you that was because it covered the old, hard roadway that had long ago disappeared beneath plough and weather.

If the saint came that way and halted by the mound it must have been a memorable sight, for here, tradition said, the king met with him—that King of the Downland who had his home beside the river in the plain below. He came up here, so it was said, in state and listened to the tidings of the White Christ proclaimed by the preacher from that pulpit of turf under God's heaven—listened to some purpose, for it was not long afterwards that he was baptised by the saint on a fair spot in the valley beneath, a spot that is historically famous.

Perchance they all came down together, the king, his court, and the saint, through the spot where the village lies to-day. Nay, it is more than possible that the village was even then existing, for a manuscript of the early part of the tenth century refers to it as "this ancient and venerable place."

Through the long years the Saint's Mound, that solitary hillock, stood on the Downs. From many miles away it could be discerned, a little raised lump against the skyline. Few

were the footsteps that came near it, for it was a bit away from any of the Down paths, and the place was not the place of trippers. Where the saint had stood centuries before was solitude—the true home of the spirit of the Downs were he in calm or boisterous mood.

You reached the spot after a bit of a climb and threw yourself down on the rough grass beneath the gnarled, stunted tree. Lying there you were on the roof of things, where the pure, sweet air of the Downland came in great inspiring breaths, rousing the corn below into waves of life, sighing through the trees in the copse a couple of hundred yards to the eastward, and rustling the patches of longer grass that grew on the old tumulus.

The saint, if, indeed, he preached here, had a wonderful view from his pulpit, a little altered by the centuries since in the way of cultivation and habitations, but the same in its great outline.

Northward, beneath your feet, lay the village; beyond and around the broad plain. Somewhere in the distance was the river, hidden by trees. Rising abruptly out of the plain, just by the river, was a great double hill, crowned by earthworks, commanding one of the ancient fords. Beyond the river rose the

hills of another county, in olden days another kingdom, the water being the dividing line.

On the north-east was a curious spur of the Downs running right out into the great plain, terminating in a strange, bare hill with entrenchments on its slope. If the story was correct, the saint, when he looked over to that hill, saw nought of these entrenchments. They were made long years afterwards by a people he never knew, the terrible Danes who ravaged the kingdom. Over there was fought, according to tradition, a great battle between the men of the Downlands and these invaders.

Eastward ran the long range of Downs, undulating, soft, and rounded in form, on the highest summit the outline of a Roman camp. Southward, again, the lonely Downs—a great expanse with never a sign of a habitation except one lonely cottage, flanked by stunted fir-trees which served as a protection against the prevailing south-west wind. Westward there were Downs, too, broken up with long, gentle slopes, upland plains and lowland country, here and there a solitary habitation. Just at the edge of the lower slopes, like a long, thin, white ribbon, ran the road—the ancient Roman Port Way, a road for the most part destitute of hedges, exposed and wind-swept, skirting the sides of the Downs

and, sometimes, mounting them in sinuous curves. Every few miles villages, hidden among trees from this point of view, flanked the downland road, which rarely ran through them—a turning out of the Port Way led down to them. Separate, isolated communities were these downland villages, with seldom even a house on the road between them. Each of them self-contained, a little world of characters and individualities. Each one with its own particular outlook and idiosyncrasies. They even recognised that, somehow, they were distinctive.

"They Camford folk allus were a reg'lar unked lot, allus a quarrelling 'bout summat or other. You gen'rally hears as how Little Marpleton be a civil, sober, friendly kind o' plaäce, but anyone 'ull tell 'e they be rare uns to drink and knock one another about over at Lamton. They be clean folks up there at Southbury, but they do say they never washes theirselves down at West Calham. Ah, Little Marpleton people was allus good churchgoers, but they fills the chapels at Great Tarlington. There en't no accountin' for it."

Certainly the saint never saw the white streamers of steam in the distance, creeping along the iron roads from three directions that

converged on the junction, the link with the outer world of bustling humanity that was so far removed from the quiet Downs. But that was another world altogether, for him, and for the dwellers in Downland now. This was the world of space and freedom and great distances, very much like what the saint himself must have found it when he turned his steps from landing on our southern shores to evangelise the unknown.

Westward, over the line of the hills, the sun went down. A straggling line of trees stood out against the glow. The lower slopes became shaded in purple distance; the early autumn mist gathered thinly over the plain; the tree clumps darkened; the wind came sighing over the grass, lamenting the dying day; a solitary labourer living in one of those distant cottages came tramping along the path below you on the side of the hill with toil-weary steps, basket over shoulder, making homewards.

So you came down into the village, leaving the Saint's Mound with its twisted tree to watch through the night. The Downland became wrapt in shadow and mystery, hiding its eternal secrets under the pale stars.

THE CURFEW

IX

THE CURFEW

In the winter months the ringing of the curfew brought the day to an end. They kept ancient dates in the village, reckoning these winter months in old style. Wherefore the first ringing of the curfew was on the night of the eleventh of October, that being "Old Michaelmas Day," and the last was upon April the sixth—"Old Lady Day."

The ringing of the curfew always seemed so real—something more than the mere memory of a worn-out custom. It seemed to close the day with all its toils and labours, to ring out that all was done, to ring to rest.

The manner of the actual ringing was this:

A little before eight o'clock, Jim Stacey, parish clerk and sexton, took down his old horn lantern from its nail on the kitchen wall, opened it, lighted the stump of the candle therein, and fared forth into the night. In good time, for there were pretty sure to be greetings on the way, greetings that came through the darkness—

"How be, Jim?"

"What—be that you, Ezra? I thought 'twas. How be things, then?"

"Purty middlin', thankee. Missus, she've got the rheumatics agen. Nigh on curfew time then, Jim?"

"Ah. Just goin' to ring un. Good-night, Ezra."

"Good-night, Jim."

Jim progressed a little farther, only to be stopped by Mrs. Lovejoy. The latter wished to impart a piece of news.

"I've just seen Tom Bates, Muster Stacey. Dunno as 'a can go on much longer. Tur'ble baäd 'a looks. En't there room fur he side of his brother? They were askin' about it."

Jim Stacey shook his head. As actual sexton he had the better memory.

"No," he replied; "we put Sally Tipper in there—ah—three year ago, 'twas. Doän't you reck'lect?"

"Ah, so us did," replied Mrs. Lovejoy. "I oughter ha' knowed that. I laid her out and came to the buryin'. O' course! Well, good-night, Muster Stacey. I'll tell Tom Bates 'a'll have to be put somewhere else!"

Jim Stacey wished her good-night, entered the churchyard, and strode, with heavy, clanking boots, up the stone-paved path leading to the south door of the church, his lantern

swinging in his hand. He passed into the church, closing the door behind him and bolting it. For many years the huge, ancient lock of the great weather-beaten, oaken south door had been out of order, and the only way to fasten it was to bolt it from the inside.

Jim Stacey walked slowly through the dark church to the western tower. Here, in one of the angles, he unlocked a small door and began to ascend the narrow winding stairway, the stones of which were hollow in the centre from generations of footsteps. At length he reached the level of the ringing chamber, another little door leading into it.

A large, square chamber. On the western side the fine perpendicular window, in the north-west corner the old clock in its heavy wooden case. From above, through holes in the oak ceiling, the eight bell ropes hanging, with their long, coloured "sallies," coiled at the ends, for the bells were always kept "up," with the exception of the tenor.

Jim Stacey stood his lantern on the stone window-sill. It was very silent in the ringing chamber, with the exception of the monotonous, heavy ticking of the great clock. He fitted the key, a big crank, on the socket, and wound it up—first the clock, then the striking mechanism.

Then he sat down—there were a few wooden chairs in the ringing chamber—and waited in silence. A watcher of old Time. He stretched out his legs, crossed them, folded his arms across his chest, and slowly bowed his head. For Jim Stacey had come to the end of a long day's work, and was tired.

Suddenly there was a metallic "click," a whirr of machinery, the jerky tightening of a wire that ran from the clock case up through the oaken floor above to the belfry, and then, overhead, the big hammer struck the tenor bell.

"Boom!"

Eight times—well spaced between—the deep, resonant note rang out into the night, filling the tower with its quivering, lingering sound.

Jim Stacey had risen to his feet. He uncoiled the end of the rope of the seventh bell, held the end with his left hand, taking a little turn in it, stretched upwards, grasped the "sallie" with both hands, and stood, rigid and ready.

Before the last "boom" of the tenor bell had died away, he pulled the "sallie" steadily downwards. The great bell overhead swung over, the rope flew up, and "clang" sounded the first note of the curfew as the bell came

round. Not so deep or resounding a tone as that of the tenor, but more piercing.

He gave an almost imperceptible pull at the end of the rope, and it came swirling down, rattling upon the floor. The bell came over again and clanged its message to the village below. For several minutes, in regular strokes, the bell rang out. Then, as the rope flew upwards, he omitted the little pull. The bell stopped. The sound ceased.

He let go of the rope for a minute and left it dangling above his head. He waited. Then he reached up to it once more—and pulled.

Fifteen times the seventh bell spoke. Fifteen times, to remind the village that the fifteenth day of the month was dying. Fifteen knells to mark its departure.

So rang the curfew! They heard it in the village below. Farmer Wood, sitting by his fireside, pipe in mouth, bethought him that the day's "sheening" had gone well. The landlord of the Blue Lion sauntered into his taproom, expectant of "reg'lars." Poor old Sally Hemming thanked God that her "browntitis" had been a little better that day. The carrier, on his slow way homeward from Derringford, welcomed the sound that told him he was nearly at the end of his day's

work. Tom Horner, away up on the Downs, intent upon questionable business, heard the sound in the valley below and slightly changed his direction, for thin mists were skidding across the uplands, and it was not easy to find one's way that night.

Another day had passed over the Downland. So sounded the message of the curfew.

Jim Stacey stopped, coiled the rope, took up his lantern, and prepared to descend the dark, narrow stairway.

The curfew had been rung once more.

His heavy footsteps clattered through the silent church. Fitful gleams of his lantern shone on tablets and brasses—memorials of those who had heard the curfew ring so many years ago. The church was very quiet and peaceful. There were no haunting shadows in the gloom. Centuries of simple devotion had, surely, affected the atmosphere.

He went out through the north doorway, closed the door after him with a heavy clang, inserted the big key in the keyhole and locked it with a jangle and rattle of the bolt, said good-night to a passing villager, walked round the west tower to the southern path.

Just across the way, as he left the churchyard, a door stood open, the light streaming out. It was the little club-room of the village

Jim Stacey put his head inside the door. Greetings ensued.

Schoolmaster was smoking his pipe, sitting by the fire, newspaper in hand. Two youths were engaged in billiards on the half-size table the club boasted. The grocer sat at a table, pack of cards in hand, waiting for a stray adversary.

"Hullo, Jim; come and have a game o' crib."

But Jim shook his head.

"I be tired," he said; "I 'oodn't ha' come out at all without 'twas to ring curfew."

"Come *in!*" said schoolmaster, but only elicited a general "good-night" from the clerk and sexton.

Lights were already apparent at some of the upper windows in the village. For some of them went to bed early in Little Marpleton. They got up so early!

Jim Stacey entered his cosy kitchen, took off his boots, put his feet in the fender, and gave a yawn of satisfaction as Mrs. Stacey set bread and cheese and beer on the table beside him.

If the ringing of the curfew once meant the outputting of fires, to Jim Stacey, the actual ringer of to-day, it heralded three of life's best

things—supper, a pipe by his own fireside, and bed!

And so the curfew rang out the passing days of simple lives. For there was little else to mark them!

THE DANCE

X

THE DANCE

A DANCE in those days was always a solemnity. It ever recalled that early Victorian word "genteel." Even that stern old nonconformist, of the Particular Baptist persuasion, Mrs. Bardley, saw no objection to a dance. Not that she ever went to one, or went to any public functions—except for her chapel—but she was a great critic and denunciator of all amusements. Concerts were an abomination, the human voice being only intended by the Creator for hymn singing. Instrumental music that was not strictly of a sacred character emanated from the wicked one. Magic lanterns, on account of the name, savoured of witchcraft. As she once told Paäson to his face:

"The Scripture says, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' That was what God thought of *magic*, sir, as *I've* been brought up to believe. And yet you're going to have a *magic* lantern in your Church school, sir!"

Paäson explained that on this particular

occasion the "magic" lantern was to be used to illustrate a missionary's lecture.

"Ah," she retorted, "Paul was a missionary. But *he* wouldn't have nought to do wi' magic. He made those wicked people at Ephesus burn their magical books. I'm afraid it's the *devil*, sir!"

But *dancing* she was willing to allow. For the simple reason that it was scriptural; David having danced before the ark!

David's performance, according to the Scriptures and the sarcastic remarks of his wife, could scarcely have been characterised by the word "genteel." Nor would his taste have been satisfied at a dance in the schoolroom.

The school was carefully prepared beforehand. Desks with tops turned down to make seat backs, were arranged all round the walls, one small one being placed in a little passage as a "sitting-out" resort. The classroom opening into the big schoolroom was devoted partly to refreshments, partly to the orchestra—the village band. The remaining classroom was set apart as the ladies' dressing room. These things were taken in hand by a committee of ladies, who also provided the refreshments—sandwiches, cakes, lemonade, tea, and coffee—the latter made from coffee essence, and particularly execrable.

The charge for admission, including refreshments, was one shilling. This prohibitive price ensured respectability. The majority of the "bloods," even if dancing had been in their line, would not have paid more than sixpence. As it was, they congregated outside and attempted to survey the festivities within by climbing up to the windows and peering through chinks provided by ill-fitting blinds, ever ready to stampede on the approach of their enemy—Jarvis the policeman.

Of course the farmers and their friends attended. The men-folk of this group came in strict evening dress, and their ladies also came with a due regard to position. There was one lady, who with her husband—retired from something or other—had settled in the village, wore a large pearl necklace, was very grand and patronising, and frequently spoke, with much superiority, of having been accustomed to "moving in political circles in London. . . ." One fancied her as a sort of female dervish, spinning round on a floor marked with mysterious symbols of "Tariff Reform," "Free Trade," and "Home Rule." Anyhow she was supposed, in some way or other, to be cognisant of Cabinet secrets and to be an acquisition.

Then there were the real exponents of the

"genteel." Very superior folks. They were people steeped in correct deportment to the finger-tips, bearing themselves in a manner that was rigidly proper in every detail. One almost imagined that flirtations in the solitary "sitting out" passage concluded, if carried to desperate extremities, by the request: "May I imprint a kiss upon your lips?" and the very coquettish response, "Yes, Alfred, I think you may. Only *one*, please."

The male sex of this group were not attired in evening dress—with very rare solitary exceptions. Sometimes a frock coat was in evidence, but generally it was an ordinary black suit of sombre cut. Gloves — white cotton ones as a rule—were always worn, dancing or not. Besides the few young men of this group from the village itself, there was a sprinkling from outside. No dance was ever complete, for example, without Arthur Bidmead, the young draper's assistant from Hursley. He was a recognised authority on every kind of step; he knew the intricacies of every figure; he was the personification of another early Victorian word—*elegance*. Long hair, carefully brushed, pince-nez accurately balanced on nose, small moustache, diamond pin in his white cravat, socks of the brightest

hue showing beneath his trousers—no one could match Arthur Bidmead.

The ladies of this particular group came generally in semi-evening dress. They sat, bolt upright, in the classroom before the ball opened, smiling faintly and taking care that it should never be said of them that they made advances. They were polite and proper, as befitted the solemnity of the function.

Lastly, there came a little sprinkling of pure agriculturists. Two or three young men in ill-fitting, but very tidy, dark suits, faces shining with soap-rubbing, hair carefully oiled, awkward of gait and manner, rarely speaking except to each other, shy of asking any girl to dance until things were in full swing, very stolid and well-behaved. Also a few village maidens, not in "evening dress," but with touches of bright finery about them, giggling under their breath in a corner by themselves—bashful but, in their freshness, alluring.

The band was as solemn as the rest. With knitted brows they gazed fiercely at their music and blew their instruments. A drum was really not needed, but the drummer always came, considering himself indispensable.

The groups kept themselves strictly divided

all the evening. Young farmers danced with farmers' daughters—or others of their set. Arthur Bidmead and his kind spun round with maidens of their own kind. The agriculturists paired together. They never mixed. Even with square dances it was the same. The farmer group had *their* set of lancers, the others theirs. There was no social equality in the village dance.

Dancing was absolutely correct. "Kitchen lancers" would have been abhorred as disgusting. They knew the figures accurately and went through them with extreme decorum.

Nor, especially among the "Bidmead" group, was conversation permitted for a single moment while actually dancing. They were much too intent on time and figure. Paäson's wife once took a friend who was staying at the Vicarage to a dance. But she disgraced herself and received a severe snub. The great Arthur Bidmead asked her to waltz with him, and as they glided into the room she had the temerity and bad sense to talk! She said to him,

"It's been a lovely day, hasn't it?"

To which he replied sternly,

"Sshh!—one, two, three—one two, three—one, two, three!"

She was properly silent for the rest of the waltz—no, they always said "valse"—while he continued counting out loud at intervals. For it was quite correct to count. You heard subdued murmurs of "one, two, three" from all parts of the room. Otherwise there was strict silence as far as the human voice was concerned.

The interval for refreshments was also conducted with due decorum—and separate groups. Sundry bandsmen took the opportunity for a retreat, but were sure to be back a few minutes after ten. Ten o'clock was the closing hour of the Blue Lion. And the music after the interval was generally a little bit more spirited—especially with regards to the drum. But the rest of the company were as "genteel" as ever, perhaps with a little less reserve.

They generally concluded with "Sir Roger de Coverley" just about midnight, superior persons quite refusing to take part in anything so old-fashioned, but indulgently watching the grave and somewhat funereal procession of the others when the "march round" took place.

They parted, still "genteelly," after having apparently thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Arthur Bidmead and his male companions from a distance produced cigarettes from

nickel cases, lighted them, and departed on bicycles. A waggonette or two took other distant guests. Shawls were thrown over heads, great-coats struggled into by the others, and they walked home quietly through the deserted village in the moonlight, some, after the manner of eternal nature, sorting themselves into couples and preferring to separate from the rest.

But, alas! sometimes you could just hear the voice of some very demure damsel, who formed half of one of the couples, giggling as the shadow of a tree fell across them, and saying, "Don't, Jack!"

Followed, all the same, if the ear were quick enough to catch it, by the sound you would expect after such a familiar protest.

PREJUDICES

XI

PREJUDICES

THEY showed their "orkardness" by strange prejudices. And there were no arguments that could ever convince them when once they had a prejudice. This "orkardness" often came out in matters ecclesiastical, as Paäson sometimes found to his amusement rather than to his cost. Once he had a friend staying with him for a week-end, a layman who offered to read the Lessons for him on Sunday, and did so.

Next morning Paäson found a paper fixed by tintacks to the church door. The writing on it was in a rough printing hand, large lettering, and questionable spelling. And it read thus:

"A SOCIEL DISGRACE.

"Parsons work one day a week other peeple work six. Why should the other peeple assist the parson on his one day?"

Old William Briggs had decided objections to what he was pleased to call "High Church." The expression is used advisedly, for in the

mysterious workings of his brain things "High Church" were wont to be extraordinary and not within the category of Kensitites. They were putting a new flagstaff on the church tower one day, the old one having rotted with force of weather. Old William came through the churchyard as a little group were standing there gazing upwards. One of them said to him:

"That's a fine new flagpost they be puttin' up, en't un, Muster Briggs?"

To which he replied scathingly:

"I don't hold with it. I be Low Church!" and passed on without a glance at the obnoxious emblem.

At the eastern end of the south aisle was the beautiful Lady Chapel, always called by the villagers the "Ladies' Chapel." Somehow they seemed to take it for granted that it was specially reserved for the fair sex. Mrs. Lovejoy was exceedingly indignant on the occasion of a harvest festival when, the body of the church being crowded, a dozen men who came in rather late were shown into the chapel by the churchwarden.

"I never heered o' such a thing," she said, "as puttin' all they men in the Ladies' Chapel. Simmed quite wrong."

But William Briggs knew that chapel by its

rightful and singular title, and nothing would ever make him go near the south aisle where he could see it. He waxed particularly wrathful when Paäson's wife asked Mrs. Briggs to decorate the Lady Chapel one Christmas.

"I shan't allow her to do it," he said decidedly. "My family ain't goin' to have nought to do with the Lady Chapel. It's a bit o' popery, and I don't hold wi' it."

It was old Farmer Gringer, who also had peculiar ideas of popery and ritualism. A strange preacher, a friend of Paäson's, came to occupy the pulpit at a Lenten service. For the sake of convenience he brought with him what is termed by ecclesiastical outfitters a "pocket surplice," being a robe made of an exceedingly flimsy material that can easily be folded up and put into a coat pocket. Next day Paäson met old Samuel Gringer and asked him how he liked the preacher of the previous evening.

"Not at all," said the old man bluntly.

"Oh, but why?"

"Because he was High Church."

Paäson was bewildered. His friend had preached the simplest of sermons and had done absolutely nothing, by word or gesture, to deserve being put into the farmer's category.

"Whatever makes you say he was "High Church?" he asked, out of sheer curiosity.

"'Twas his surplice," replied Samuel Gringer.

"His *surplice*?"

"Ah! 'Twas so thin you could almost see through it. I didn't like it at all. I never *did* like anything High Church."

Nor would he be convinced to the contrary. But then it was almost impossible to convince Samuel Gringer to the contrary once he had made up his mind. When Paäson first came to the village he found a recently established custom prevailing in the winter months. The north and south doors of the church were exactly opposite each other, and if both were open when the wind blew from the north or south the church grew cold in a very few minutes. Therefore it had been decreed that during the winter the south door should be permanently closed.

But, all his life, Samuel Gringer had entered the church by that particular door and never by the north. It is doubtful whether, could wild horses have been procurable, they would have been able to drag old Farmer Gringer through the northern entrance. As soon as the south door was closed for the winter he stopped going to church. You might din arguments into his ears by the hour. He took

them quite good-naturedly and placidly, invariably, however, maintaining his ground at the end of them.

"I always have gone into the church by the south door, and I always *shall*. I never went in by the north door, and I never *will*."

That was all, except that he turned the conversation immediately by referring to the price of pigs at Derringford market the previous Friday, or the probable rise or fall of wheat at next week's market. After the first winter of this sort of thing Paäson caused the south door to remain as a means of entrance and egress—and Samuel Gringer came regularly every Sunday.

Whether the origin of his obstinacy had anything to do with the old superstition that, in some way or other, the north door of the church was connected with the powers of darkness, it is impossible to say. But there were folks about who hinted darkly of an ancient custom of having the north door open during a baptism in order that the Devil, when leaving the child, might find his lawful way out. And there was a prejudice against being buried at the north side of the churchyard.

In a neighbouring village they added a new north aisle to the church. In excavating the site, it was found from the remains of skeletons

that all the bodies on that side of the church had been buried in the reverse position—namely, with the feet towards the west. Possibly they had been suicides.

They described the prejudices of others by the good old name of "orkardness." Not entirely disparagingly. There was something to be admired in the character of a man who had a reputation for "orkardness." It was somewhat of a sterling quality. It meant that he would stick to his opinion even if that opinion were a wrong one, and that the virtue of sticking to it counterbalanced the vice of its untruth or absurdness.

"Ah, when once Muster Wood hev got a notion in his head 'ten't like un to give in to ara one. 'A be a tur'ble orkard man—saäme as his father was afore un."

And that meant eulogy and admiration. Orkardness was the art of maintaining your own against all other opinions or advice whatsoever. The fool was one who "didn't know his own mind," and had to be guided by others, which was always a sign of weakness—except when you were the person who gave the advice. Old Jonathan Price, who hadn't entered the church for over forty years—not because he had renounced Christianity, but on account of losing his pew when they reseated the fabric

at the "restoration"—was rather a man to be pointed at with pride as being consistent and continuous in his "orkardness," and to be quoted in conjunction with the phrase "And n'ara paäson were ever able to talk un out o' it and get un to goo to church again," with a sense of satisfaction that the old man was one too many for Paäson, and the suggestion of delighted pride because Paäson came out of it a great deal lower in the scale than did Jonathan Price.

There were prejudices founded upon the isolation of the community. Things always loomed large within the precincts of the village. But outside affairs were either very immaterial or deserved contempt. The point of view was very forcibly put to a candidate for parliamentary honours who was addressing a village meeting, and waxed eloquent on the subject of Home Rule for Ireland. He was interrupted by a sturdy yokel at the back of the room, who shouted:

"We doän't want to hear nought about Ireland, Mister. We wants to know what we be a-goin' to git for hoein' turmuts!"

Paäson came back from a seaside holiday and met old Amos Weedon, aged well over seventy, returning from work.

"Ah, Amos," he said, "you're a wonderful

man for your age, but I saw even a more wonderful man than you last week."

"Who be he, then, sir?"

"An old Sussex fisherman, turned eighty-two. The day I saw him he'd started fishing at two in the morning and didn't get home to breakfast till eleven o'clock."

But Amos Weedon gave a snort of great contempt, and replied:

"Fisherman! Ah, they doän't have to work hard loike we does!"

His sole idea of a fisherman being that of a person who sat by the side of a stream with a rod in his hand.

Prejudices extended to the next village. It was always a point of honour to despise neighbours of the nearer communities. One's own village was not only the centre of the universe, but also the centre of all that was moral and desirable. Old Mrs. Barton, who had lived in Little Marpleton all her life, was wont to boast that she "didn't know nought about Fritton, she hadn't never been there and didn't want to." Fritton being situated exactly one and a half miles away. Amos Weedon's great crown of glory, which he was always exhibiting, was the proud fact that he had never slept out of the village a single night the whole of his life, thereby implying

that he had kept himself free of the obnoxious night air of any other place.

Paäson engaged a new gardener, a handsome, well-set-up man, who came from a neighbouring village. On Sunday afternoons in summer, what time the "bloods" who had girls "walked out" in pride and, for the most part, in silence—this man spent the lazy hours lying on his back in Paäson's orchard, smoking his pipe on the scene of his workday labours. And the reason why he spent his time in solitude was given by a maidservant unto Paäson's wife:

"Why do he do it, ma'am? Because he can't get n'ara young 'ooman to walk out wi' un. 'Ten't likely he could, him bein' a straänger." Then, with a fine contempt: "Why, he be a Camford man!"

A LITTLE CHILD'S FUNERAL

XII

A LITTLE CHILD'S FUNERAL

William Budd was digging a grave in the churchyard on a still, hot summer's evening, after having been a "hay-maäkin'" all day. William Budd was not the sexton, but sometimes acted as deputy, the sexton being the village carpenter, and a busy man at his trade. Everyone fell back on "Willum" for odd jobs. He was a powerful, magnificent worker, and never dawdled or idled. You knew you could trust him to work when your back was turned as hard as he would if you were present. Even harder, for he was a communicative man and loved a chat.

Paäson strolled from his garden into the churchyard, and stood for a minute or two looking at him.

"Very warm, William," he said.

William stood up, took his right hand from his spade, and drew the back of it across his brow.

"Warm? 'Tis reg'lar hot, sir. I doän't reck'lect many hotter daäys than this un be.

Why, when I was a walkin' hoäme from hayfield a time back my feet was in such a sweat that they was a goin' slosh in ma boots!"

"I expect you found it thirsty work—hay-making?"

William rested on his spade and looked at Paäson, a twinkle in his eye. He knew exactly what Paäson meant.

"Ah," he assented, "sort o' weather when a gallon doän't sim to go fur, sir."

And his face lighted up with a broad grin.

"You'd hardly call that *moderation*, would you, William?"

"Oh, I dunno 'bout that, sir," replied William, nothing abashed. "Ye see, this sort o' weather you be so hot inside that anything you drinks sims to dry up afore its finished a-goin' down your throat. Let them as preaches total abstinence try fillin' a hay-waggon on a daäy like this."

"I wasn't preaching total abstinence," said Paäson mildly; "I'm a believer in moderation, you know."

"Ah, you're right, sir," assented William joyfully. "Same here. I often says to some on 'em, 'You ain't got no sense,' I says, 'a drinkin' like you does,' I says. A man oughter be content wi' a gallon a day, I

reckon — or'nary daäys. Hay-maäkin' and harvest time, 'tis different."

Paäson, mentally reckoning that a gallon meant sixteen glasses of beer, hardly considered this a particularly strong argument for moderation. William dug away in silence for a few minutes, standing in the tiny grave to do so. Then he swung himself out of it and contemplated his handiwork.

"'T'ool do, I thinks, sir. 'Tis only a little un, worse luck. Somehow, sir, I can't a-bear a diggin' a little grave—'tis allus a casalty job!"

And, turning his head, his gaze fell on a a small, turfy mound, a few yards away. Paäson understood.

"'Tis not fur we to saäy, I s'pose," he went on meditatively, "but it sims a pity when they be took so young. I wunner whether they grows up—yonder," he added thoughtfully.

"I feel quite sure they do," replied Paäson.

"This here child—what you be a berryin' to-morrow, sir. A rare bright little un, she were! There was only two on 'em. Bert Stapley doän't saäy much, but 'a feels it—*I* knows. Well, I'd best be gettin' on, I reckon."

And, as if ashamed of himself for being

sentimental he cracked a joke with Paäson, covered up the little grave with a sheet of corrugated iron, and walked off, spade under arm.

The following afternoon the funeral took place. The sexton, in Sunday black, scattered fresh elm boughs on the bottom of the grave.

"There was a drop or two o' water in un, and folks doän't like to see that," he explained, "besides," he went on, "looks kind o' nice, I think—specially fur a little un."

He walked side by side with Paäson, the latter white-robed, to the entrance of the churchyard, where the path led to the open Play Close. They waited there together.

"Here they come, sir."

Paäson looked towards the Play Close. In the bright sunshine of the glorious summer afternoon, across the sward where so lately she had run laughing with the others, they carried the child. The little coffin was borne, according to the immemorial custom of the Downland when a child dies, by her fellow-playmates. Four little girls, dressed in pure white, were the bearers—two on either side—firmly grasping the clean, white towels on which the coffin was slung; four children, with sad faces and a suspicion of red eyes as they came nearer.

Bert Stapley followed, with set, stolid face, gazing straight in front of him, his wife clinging to his arm with one hand and leading the child that was left to them with the other —a little sprinkling of relatives, and, of course, old Mrs. Lovejoy, the village "nurse" in best—if ancient—silk dress and black bonnet carrying a very large prayer-book: very respectable, very self-conscious, and, apart from the dignity of her office, very sympathetic. The bell stopped tolling and the little "ting tang" began to ring. Paäson led the simple procession through the churchyard into the church. Quietly the children deposited their sad burden on two low trestles at the entrance of the chancel. The mourners took their places, Mrs. Lovejoy sitting in her accustomed seat well at the back: children—it was Saturday afternoon—crept into the church, huddling in groups by the door, to pay their tribute of affection.

All was so hushed and quiet and strangely beautiful.

Out into the sunshine they came once more, down the path, over the grass to the little grave. . . .

Paäson closed his book. There was silence.

Bert Stapley led his wife forward—one last look at the white-covered coffin—a handful of

fresh flowers dropped—a stifled sob. And they slowly departed. Children gathered round the open grave; the sexton took up his shovel; the four bearers gave up their towels to Mrs. Lovejoy—to whom they belonged—and went away sadly in couples, hand in hand.

Mrs. Lovejoy walked by the side of Paäson as he returned to the church, folding up the towels.

"I helped bring her into the world," she was saying, "and I laid her out! I done my dooty by her—poor mite. Ah, well! 'Tis t' be hoped we shan't want these here things fur many a long daäy, sir."

The bell sounded, according to custom. They always tolled the bell, quickly, directly the funeral was over. Paäson made the entry in the Register of Burials, adding one more sad record to the annals of the simple surroundings amid which they lived and died.

"Violet, daughter of Herbert and Mary Stapley, aged 6 years, buried July 3rd, 19—."

And put the book back in the chest among the older volumes—the long-forgotten names, the Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths dating from 1588, the brief memories of joys and sorrows, of life and death, the same in every age.

THE BISHOP'S VISIT

XIII

THE BISHOP'S VISIT

Episcopal visits were few and far between. The Bishop bore sway over a huge diocese, for the most part composed of rural parishes, and though he had it in his heart to know them all personally, it was not possible to get to them all.

The Bishop was a courteous, kindly man, much loved by all who came in contact with him—a man who was surely working himself to death under the great burden he had undertaken. Conscientious in the extreme.

Consulting his diary a little wearily he found a vacant date somewhere in the future, and promised Paäson to pay a visit to the Downland village. He would come, he said, and preach on a Sunday evening — quite informally.

They expressed, in the village, a good deal of satisfaction at his coming—the satisfaction of people who considered themselves worthy of the visit. For they were independent. The village had never known what it was to have a

"Squire," and they had never learned to cringe to anybody. Had the King or the Archbishop of Canterbury announced their intention of paying a visit to them they would have been intensely pleased, but would scarcely have considered it more than their due. There was a dignity about this independence of theirs that one could hardly put down to a false pride. Perhaps their isolation from the great world made them in a way unconsciously of the opinion that they were the centre of the great world.

Not that they were prepared to treat his visit lightly. They were possessed of a courtesy that was partly based on natural politeness and partly on their own pride.

Thus, when Schoolmaster, who played the organ in church, and trained the choir with genuine and marvellous ability—from pure love and from no mercenary motive, for he gave his services freely—when Schoolmaster distributed copies of an anthem to the choir for rehearsal, and remarked that they must get it up in time for the episcopal visit, the choir acquiesced readily, looking upon the production thereof not merely as a musical tribute in honour of the Bishop, but also tacitly holding that they were competent to sing any anthem ever composed, and that it was the Bishop's

pleasurable duty to feel assured of this fact by what he would hear of them.

Once, William Budd, who sang stentorian bass in the choir, was met and recognised by a lady, who had stayed in the village some time previously, in a town in the next county, where, man-of-all-work as he was, he had undertaken a temporary job during a slack season at home. He was at work just outside the church, which was a glorious and famous one.

She stopped and chatted with him, asking him presently:

"Have you been inside this church, Budd?"

Can't say as I hev, miss," he replied, in the tone of voice of a man not at all interested.

"It's very beautiful. You ought to go to the service on Sunday. As a choirman you'd enjoy it. It's celebrated for its music far and wide."

William Budd looked at her with pity rather than with scorn.

"'T'ood be a job to beat our singin' at Little Marpleton, I reckon, miss. Was you there when the Bishop come? The daäy as we sung that long anthem up at the church?"

After this she dropped the subject, feeling that in William Budd's estimation there was no choir in England that could compete with his own.

On the day of the episcopal visit further preparations were made. The Bishop was expected to arrive in the late afternoon—in time for tea. Jim Stacey, the parish clerk, mounted to the top of the tower and hoisted the flag, surveying his handiwork with satisfaction. The ringers congregated in the churchyard, and then slowly proceeded to climb the winding stairs to the ringing chamber, one of their number mounting on to the roof of the tower to keep watch on the narrow strip of white road outside the village, to mark the first appearance of the episcopal vehicle. It was meet and right and according to ancient custom that His Lordship's entry should be greeted with the music of the bells.

Suddenly they began. The carriage had been sighted. Clear and resonant rang their mellow voices over the Downland. Paäson strolled down to the Vicarage gate in readiness.

But when the carriage drove up it was empty—except for the episcopal robe and suit cases. The coachman explained. The Bishop wanted a little exercise and had got out a mile or so from the village, intending to walk the rest of the way. Paäson sent a message to the tower for them to go on ringing, and then started out to meet His Lordship.

The Bishop's entry into the village was characteristic of his simplicity and a certain boyishness which sometimes showed itself. He came, surrounded by a number of children with whom he had already made friends, a snapshot camera in his hand, pausing every now and again to take a photograph of some particularly picturesque bit of the village. Such was his triumphant progress!

On the Vicarage lawn the tea-table was laid. Around it were the officials of the church, the two churchwardens and the sidesmen. They were a little ill at ease as they greeted the great man, but he soon put them all right. With his peculiar grace of manner and fine knowledge of those with whom he had to deal he at once plunged into agricultural topics as if they were his special study, loosening their tongues to talk of market prices and prospects of hay and corn harvests.

Tea over, it was nearly church time. He insisted upon taking a snapshot of Paäson and the church officials, and maintained that the proper background was the church itself. So they went over to the south porch and he arranged them there. People were flocking into church. He waved them back till he had taken his photograph.

They stood, watching, with respect for the

person of the Bishop mingled with some consternation for his actions. Mrs. Lovejoy eyed him in silence as he gave directions to the little group in the porch, and stepped back to look for them in his view-finder.

"Ah," she said afterwards, "I liked his sermon well enough, but fancy him a-taäkin' picturs o' Muster Wood and Muster Gringer on a Sundaäy! Him bein' a Bishop, too!"

She, like the rest of the congregation, doubtless liked his sermon because it was simple and earnest. They could all understand it. The Bishop was very human.

After the service he strolled through the village and up "lydds" to the open Downs above. He stood looking over the great expanse of a bit of his big diocese. He could see the villages below and mark the towers of several churches standing out white against the trees. Perhaps some sense of the loneliness and isolation of those villages and of those who worked therein under his jurisdiction came upon him, for he was very silent.

The next morning was Empire Day. Schoolmaster had arranged a little surprise. In the midst of breakfast the school children came on the lawn, some of the bigger ones in fancy dress, and, grouped under the Union Jack, sang their patriotic songs. The Bishop's

boyishness came upon him. Seizing his camera he opened the window, jumped out, and snapshotted them. One of the girls, blushing and smiling, came forward with a huge bouquet and he received it gracefully.

"Thank you so much, dear children," he said; "this is perfectly delightful of you. I'm going straight up to London presently and I shall see the King to-day. If I get an opportunity I shall tell him about this very pretty scene—which I shan't forget!"

They smiled with pride. But, very likely, agreed with their elders that it was only right that the King should be acquainted with the loyalty of his liege subjects of this no insignificant portion of his Empire.

So the Bishop left, bouquet in hand. It was the last time he visited the village. His labours led him, not long afterwards, to pay a visit to that bourne from which, so Shakespeare tells us, no traveller returns.

MICHAELMAS HIRING

XIV

MICHAELMAS HIRING

They kept Michaelmas, apart from the ecclesiastical festival at the church, according to the old style—to wit, on the eleventh of October. It was the season of uprooting and transmigration so far as the "farm servants" were concerned. There was a notable difference between the "farm servant" and the ordinary labourer. The latter was only engaged by the week, and his services might be dispensed with at any time when work was slack. The "farm servant," on the other hand, held a yearly appointment which began and ended at Michaelmas. If he left before his year was out he forfeited his "Michaelmas Money." Moreover, he paid no rent, part of his price being a cottage, rent free.

There were various reasons why "farm servants" left their employment at Michaelmas, some of them obvious, some of them wellnigh impossible to discover, so strange was their peculiar psychology. A man wanted to

"better himself." His cottage was not weatherproof, and the farmer refused to repair it adequately. He had taken a secret dislike to his master, and wanted a change. Sometimes it was sheer restlessness, the desire to get away from the village to fresh fields of labour, often resulting in a year or two in his return with the remark that the other place or the other master "worn't no good of—'twas a casalty job."

Men would change their masters at Michaelmas for no apparent reason. Jesse Finch, having worked seven years in succession for Farmer Wood, bluntly, and refusing to say why, informed his master—who had never a fault to find in him—"I en't a-goin' to be took on by 'ee this Michaelmas, sir," and promptly hired himself to Farmer Gringer at a wage of two shillings less a week, a much inferior cottage, and a pound less "Michaelmas Money" at the end of the year. Nobody ever knew the reason of it except that it might have been his particular method of asserting an independent spirit.

The actual transaction generally took place at the Michaelmas hiring fair in one of the Downland market towns. Thither proceeded the farmers, driving in from the villages, glancing critically over their neighbours' lands

by the way, pockets well lined, and appetites growing beneath their waistcoats, bargain making in their thoughts. Mine hosts of the White Hart, the Red Lion and the King's Head at Derringford were already preparing for their advent with sundry rounds of beef and juicy legs of mutton to grace the tables at the farmers' "ordinary," while perhaps the managers of the banks turned up divers ledger accounts in preparation for dealing with shrewd customers who might want a "bit o' money" out for payment of rents.

The men to be hired came, for the most part, on foot, a few selecting the slower-going carrier's cart. Arrived in the town they hung about the market-square, advertising their particular talents by outward signs. Thus, the keen-eyed, fresh-faced man who wore a little tuft of sheep's wool in his soft hat by this proclaimed himself to be a shepherd. The thickset fellow, walking with awkward gait on pavement, with a bit of whipcord knotted in the buttonhole of his Sunday-best jacket, was looking for a carter's place, having, as his badge bore witness, a knowledge of horses. While the old fellow, trying to make a brave show in spite of his years, with the weather-beaten, lined face, had pinned a tuft of hair from a cow's tail in the front of his hat to show that he was a "fogger,"

for by that name they called a man who looked after cattle in the Downland.

Transactions never took place hastily, and were often founded on knowledge gained by local gossip. Thus, the "fogger" aforesaid, seeing Farmer Gringer engaged in conversation with two other of his kind just outside the Red Lion, crossed the street, waited patiently beside the group till it broke up, touched his hat, and accosted the farmer:

"Beg pardon, sir. But I heered as how you were wantin' a fogger."

Farmer Gringer looked at him carefully, summing up his years and capabilities pretty accurately, but would not commit himself.

"Who told you, my man?"

"Muster Jenkins, over at Mudford, sir. I've worked for he this four year."

"Ah! I dunno quite whether I want a man. And you ain't so young as you was."

He did want a "fogger." But Farmer Jenkins had already told him he was getting rid of this man because he was always "bein' laid up with rheumatism."

So he passed on. His keen eye had detected a strong-looking middle-aged man wearing the same badge. He stopped him abruptly.

"Where do you come from, my man?"

The other named a distant village.

"You want to get hired on?"

"Ah!"

"Fourteen shillings a week and two pound ten Michaelmas money—and 'tis a tidy little cottage."

Thus he stated his terms.

The "fogger" demurred. He rather looked for fifteen shillings a week. Farmer Gringer, however, would make no concession, but presently asked:

"Got any children?"

"Ah—a few, sir."

"How many?"

The man reluctantly confessed to seven. That settled it. The farmer shook his head.

"'Tis no use, then," he said. "We've got about enough children in the village as 'tis. And there isn't room for your lot in the cottage."

And he turned on his heel. The old houseing problem and the farmer's often repeated objection to large families prevented him from "hiring on" this sturdy son of the soil.

Meanwhile Farmer Wood, astute man, had seen just the individual he was looking for—the shepherd with the tuft of wool. He knew well that one of his neighbours was leaving his farm, and that this man had been acting as his shepherd these ten years.

"Ah," he asked, in his calm way, "ain't you John Massey, my man?"

"That be my name, Muster Wood."

"Anyone hired you yet?"

"No, sir—leastways I en't took a shillin' from no one, but Muster Gunning wants a word wi' ma."

"I'll have one with 'ee first, John. I'm wanting a man—with a good character."

"My old master 'ull give me a good word, I reckon, sir."

"Ah, maybe he will. I'd give you fair wages—fifteen shillings, three pound ten at Michaelmas. P'raps you know our shepherd's house?"

"Ah, I 'oodn't mind un. How 'bout double couples, Muster Wood?"

"A shilling. And I keep a smaärt few sheep for lambing."

This meant that the shepherd, during the lambing season, would receive a shilling for each pair of twins lambed.

Farmer Wood had an interview with the shepherd's late master—a satisfactory one, after which he handed the man a shilling, and that sealed the contract.

Quite as efficaciously as the recruiting-sergeant's coin of the same value. Once that shilling was taken the shepherd was bound to

the farmer for a twelvemonth, to receive at the end of that time a bonus of three pounds ten in addition to his weekly wages—the "Michaelmas Money."

"When can you come, John?"

"Any day, Muster Wood."

"I'll send for 'ee on Thursday then. Will one waggon be enough?"

The man laughed.

"I reckon 't'ool hold all as we've got, sir."

It was the established rule that the farmer who hired a "servant" for the year should be responsible for moving him, his family and his belongings from the old home to the new.

John Massey put the shilling in his pocket, took the tuft of wool from his hat and threw it away, and, satisfied with his bargain, for he knew Farmer Wood's reputation, turned into a modest public-house for refreshment.

Farmer Gringer secured a "fogger" having the advantages of comparative youth and only two children. Groups began to gather outside the hotels, to disappear inside, first to the private bar, emerging after preliminary refreshment, to the "ordinary." Discussions took place. Samples of corn were handed round, produced from capacious pockets out of little string-tied bags. There was a mixed babel

anent politics, rates, wages, and the shortcomings of country paäsons, and perhaps a select few sought a room in which a game of nap could be had—sometimes with stakes that might have aroused the wearers of badges in the market-place outside to bargain for higher wages.

In the afternoon farmers and men began to melt away—out into the open country. The old "fogger" remained almost to the last, because no man had hired him, and toiled homeward his seven miles, sad of heart and weary of limb, with the drear prospect of a casual "labourer" before him, instead of a "hired servant," and wondering how to break it to his fragile wife, cheered only by the thought that if Providence permitted him to live for another eighteen months he would qualify for that wonderful new boon—the old age pension.

"Please God I can kip out o' the union!" he prayed.

Uprootings were very simple, for possessions were few. It was nothing to leave one village for another. In that respect John Massey was better off than his richer neighbour, for he had to seek no "estimate for removals by road or rail."

Farmer Wood's waggon, drawn by two

stalwart horses driven by Harry Wade, the farmer's carter, drew up before the shepherd's cottage. John Massey, his wife, and Harry Wade brought out their bits of furniture and homely belongings, piling them in the waggon with rough skill. A rope made all fast. Mrs. Massey took a last look round to see that they had collected their all, locked the door, gave the key to a neighbour, mounted the waggon, and took her seat on a convenient mattress. John Massey climbed on to the tail-board and lit his pipe philosophically. Harry Wade gathered up the reins and cracked his whip, and so they lumbered off on their ten miles' slow journey.

Thus came shepherd John Massey into his new abode. Inquisitive children gathered round to see the furniture moved into his cottage. An equally, if not more so, inquisitive neighbour made, peering behind a blind in her abode opposite, a mental list of every article and retailed it next day to a bosom friend—with disparaging criticisms.

And, early next morning, the newly hired shepherd took his way "up lydds" to his new flock. Michaelmas hiring was over. It may have been a little epoch, but it was no very great change in his life. So he saw the sun rise over the Downland, taking in his new

surroundings with his keen eyes—the lonely shepherd—with just the glimmer of a smile of content on his fresh, wind-burnt face. Only a "hired servant," but his fate might have been far worse!

THE VILLAGE OVER THE DOWNS

XV

THE VILLAGE OVER THE DOWNS

"Goin' up Wood Way" meant a steep climb up the side of the Downs. It was only a foot-path, greasy after rain, going straight up the hill. Towards the top it struck the more roundabout "White Shoot," a rough and rugged road cut in the chalk. A bit farther up "White Shoot" were two or three little cottages, nestling for shelter against a clump of trees. A few children from the cottages attended school daily, and toiled up "Wood Way" to their homes every afternoon in all weathers—poor mites! They brought their bits of dinners with them, of course, eating them in the schoolroom, grouped round the fire on wet winter days or out in the Play Close when the sun shone.

A pull up above the cottages and the top of the great open Downs was reached. Habitations were few and far between here—one or two solitary cottages in the far distance, invariably guarded by a few straggling trees

to keep off the prevailing south-westerly winds. But, in places, one lost sight even of these cottages, and only saw the vast stretches of Downland, partly cultivated, partly pasture, a sense of deep, sad loneliness and solitude creeping over one. For these Downs had a strange melancholy attached to them, an absolutely different atmosphere from that of the rolling, sea-girt country of the south.

The chalky road ended abruptly here, on the summit, giving place to a broad, grass trackway that ran quite straight for a couple of miles—straight and, for the most part, level. Somewhere away on the left grew the Pasque flower, blossoming, according to its name, about Eastertide, bell-shaped and purple of hue. They told you that the Pasque flower only grew on spots which had been drenched with Danish blood; and, indeed, it may have been true, for the Downs held memories of many a fight between Saxons and invading North men. Perhaps this was one of the reasons of their melancholy.

There was little sign of life up there. Sometimes a flock of sheep, shepherd in front, dog rounding them up behind, straggled very slowly across one of the distant hills. A lark's song might break the great silence; a hare, startled by the unwonted appearance of

humanity, might run swiftly to cover; that was all. Life and sounds were rare.

After a while the ground on the left side of the track rose gradually. Looking up, the outline of a Roman camp could be discerned on the top of a hill that stood out from the rest—a lonely outpost of the old days. Yet it would seem they made themselves happy at times—those Roman soldiers—for within the camp was a huge heap of oyster-shell débris, remains of convivial suppers. Among the oyster-shell rubbish Roman coins were often found.

At the foot of this hill the long, broad track ended. On the right slope was a great fir copse, gloomy in the extreme. The sense of solitude and melancholy was stronger than ever here. Sometimes, if the breeze were blowing, the branches rustled and the wind came through them in sad, fitful moans. Otherwise the silence was heavy and intense.

A rough, uneven road curved round the foot of the great hill, falling and rising by turns; gradually it changed in character, beginning to do so where it crossed another rough road that antiquaries told you had once been a great Roman highway. Hedges sprung up on either side, the surface grew less uneven, the deep-cut ruts disappeared, a solitary cottage

by the side of the road came into view, the open, rolling downs were left behind.

The road narrowed and deepened, banks rose on either side, crowned with thick hedges. All distant prospects vanished; one felt a sense of oppression—of being shut in. It was all downhill now. Heavy elm-trees spread dark branches over the way; there was no freshness in the air—a contrast, for the Downs themselves were always fresh.

A sudden curve in the road, and there were the first houses of the village—ugly, uncompromising-looking houses. A woman stood in the doorway of one of them, shabby, dull-eyed, slowly turning her head as one passed; staring, but with no interest. The road divided: on the left stood a hideous, squat chapel, labelled on a stone over the door in black letters, "Ebenezer Chapel, 1821." Just the sort of thing they would have built a century ago—witness of a stern, narrow creed: an angry God to be propitiated. Opposite was the village school, equally unbeautiful. And a shop—dirty windows, behind which were arrayed a few bottles of sickly-looking sweets, a couple of biscuit tins, blacking brushes, a rusty sieve, two rolls of faded material looking as though it might have been chintz far back in the ages.

The turning to the right took one, between great, dark holly hedges, to the church. The lych-gate, old timber roofed with tiles, opened into the churchyard. Long, dank grass. Tombstones covered with grey and yellow lichen; an old, very old, yew-tree, the trunk white with age, few branches left, and some of those broken and withered.

Inside the church gloom and the emblems of death. Centuries ago a powerful family had resided in the place, and had been, as they died off, buried according to custom within the sacred edifice—buried under great, awful tombs, on the top of which lay grim, recumbent effigies, chipped, broken, and mutilated. A huge sarcophagus rather than a church, dim and mysterious, the great tombs predominating, the dead in possession—some of them, one felt it strongly, the wicked dead.

Opposite the church, shut in by thick, tall hedges, surrounded by dank trees — the Vicarage. A large, dismal, ugly-coloured house. The Vicar was a ripe scholar—lost to the great world in that lonely outpost.

There stood the remote village, shrouded by trees, far from the beaten track, hidden even from the higher Downland.

Once, at least, away back in the ages, it woke up one day. The day that a great Tudor

sovereign visited it, surrounded with gaily bedecked courtiers. That yew-tree in the churchyard was in its pride and glory then, and the Tudor monarch stood beneath its branches and praised it.

Away from the gloomy village, up the road between the deep banks, out to the heights once more, where nothing blotted out the blue of the sky and the fleecy whiteness of the scudding clouds.

The sun was setting over the Downland towards the close of the homeward journey, the trees on the distant sky-line black against the glow. In spite of the tinge of melancholy that attached itself to the beauty of the expanse, it was open and fresh and free up there—a contrast to the dank, stagnant village, where the dead kept guard in the church.

"Goin' down Wood Way" one, somehow, got back into a different bit of God's world. Tom Horner was making his way home from the Downs and one glanced, instinctively, at bulging pockets. William Budd nodded pleasantly from the steps of the Blue Lion; young Dick Webster came, red of face, through a gap in the hedge out of an orchard where he had no business to be, tucking something very much like a big apple out of sight under his jacket; the church tower was wondrously

pink in the afterglow of the sunset, a great pillar of fire to show the habitation of the living God; and Ezra Padge, who was generally "disposed to weather," passed "up street" with the cheery prophecy, "'T'ool be fine again tomorrow—that 't'ool!"

That was one of the secrets—unfathomable—kept by the rolling Downs. The villages scattered about them—isolated from each other—were so utterly different in their characteristics and atmosphere.

THE "TOP O' THE WORLD"

XVI

THE "TOP O' THE WORLD"

SOMEONE, of an imaginative turn of mind, had called the place the "Top o' the World." The "Roman Port Way," the road that skirted the Downs, suddenly took an upward curve, mounted a spur of the Downs by a steep ascent, and ran for some little distance over a high bit of tableland commanding a widely spreading view. On this tableland, beside the road, stood a solitary habitation. And this, because of its position and outlook, was the "Top o' the World."

The house was just an old cottage with a bit of a barn beside it, lying a little back from the road with a small, well-cared-for garden in front, a garden that was gay with the old-world flowers, clusters of sweet-william, golden masses of marigolds, mallows in profusion, and a climbing rose that twined its brambles freely over the rough, wooden porch. Behind was an orchard, pink in the spring with apple blossom, a cool, green patch in summer cut out of the blazing yellow corn that stretched on either side.

Two children came, slowly mounting the road that led from the distant village to the "Top o' the World"—a boy and a girl. The boy was about eleven years of age, a sturdy little chap with a certain determined expression upon his face. The girl might have been a year younger. She was a merry-looking, fair-haired child of the Downland; but the boy was a type not found in those parts. At a glance you could see they were not brother and sister. They carried their cheap school satchels over their shoulders; it was a hot summer afternoon, and they dawdled up the hill.

At the gate of the cottage stood a woman, shading her eyes with her hand as she gazed down the white road.

"You be late," she cried, as they came near; "doän't 'ee want no tea?"

"It be so hot, mother," said the girl, "we couldn't come along fast, could us, Jim?"

"Ah! 'Tis a bit fresher up here than down in th' village. I be thirsty, mother."

The woman opened the gate, looking at the boy as she did so, a curious, wistful look, the corners of her mouth quivering ever so slightly.

"Get you inside, boäth of 'ee," she said; "the kettle's bilin'. I wants ma tea badly."

As she cut their thick slices of bread and poured out their tea, she looked again at the

boy. He was not her son. He had come to her seven years before, an outcast, rescued from the London streets by one of our great benevolent societies which, among other good works, takes poor little wastrels such as he and boards them out in God's country. He had grown up side by side with her own little girl, till they had become like brother and sister. She remembered how he had been brought to her a tiny mite, pale of face, and thin of body, how almost his first words had been coarse oaths which he had learned unconsciously in those terrible surroundings from which he had been taken; she remembered how she had taught him to call her by a word he had never picked up—"mother."

She waited till the children had finished their tea, and then reached to the mantelshelf and took down a typewritten letter.

"Jim," she said, with a little gasp in her voice, "I've had a letter from the Home."

To Jim's mind the "Home" had a certain mysterious significance. In some way or other he connected it with the origin of his being, and knew that it controlled his destiny. Every now and then a lady inspector came from the "Home," weighed him, looked at his teeth, and seemed otherwise interested in his welfare.

"What is it, mother?"

"You've got to go to the "Home" on Tuesday, Jim—and—and—you en't to come back here no moäre!"

"I *'ool*," said Jim, in the Downland vernacular, while the little girl gave a long drawn "O-o-oh!"

The woman shook her head.

"They're goin' to send 'ee to Canada, Jim."

Winnie began sobbing. Jim could hardly control his tears. He had expected this fate one day or other. Other children, boarded out in the village beneath, from time to time left at short notice to be sent with a batch from the "Home" to that far-away country.

He set his lips together firmly.

"Don't cry, Winnie," he said, 'I'm a-comin' back one day—en't I, mother?"

The woman drew him to her and kissed him.

"Run out in the orchard and play, both o' 'ee," she said, a minute later.

And as they went out, she heard him say again:

"Never mind, Winnie. When I be a man, I'll come back and marry 'ee!"

* * * * *

Paäson, in whose overseership was committed the local care of the boarded-out children, had been with his wife up to the

"Top o' the World" to give final directions; they had inspected Jim's outfit and the little presents he had received, including a bright silk scarf on which Winnie had laboriously embroidered his name; had given the boy a prayer-book—Jim had sung in the choir; advanced the money for his fare to London; told his foster-mother that they had ordered a waggonette from the Blue Lion to take them to the station; and finally given her an addressed label to tie to the boy's buttonhole.

"I shall miss un a smaärt lot, sir," said the woman: "Jim's allus bin a good boy—'cept for a bit o' mischief, times. And Winnie, she do taäke on at his goin', poor child. She 'oodn't give ma no peace till I sent boäth on 'em to Shepherd King to have their picturs took together, poor dears."

Shepherd King combined the occupation of his name with the taking of photographs in his spare time. The woman pointed to the photograph on the table and told Paäson and his wife Jim was taking a copy with him.

"And he kips saäyin' he's a-comin' back one day, sir, to marry she!"

They drove in to the junction on Tuesday. Jim had his bag of clothing. His pockets were stuffed with biscuits and sweeties and packets of sandwiches, his label was tied to his button-

hole, displaying the fact that he was to be met at the London terminus.

The train came in. A word to the kindly guard, and that individual promised to see him through his journey; he threw his arms round "mother's" neck and kissed her, then he kissed Winnie, whose tears were running down her cheeks, and got into the train. The whistle sounded—the little scrap of humanity was off to the new world.

The last words they heard him say, his head stretched out of the window, the speed of the train gathering, were:

"I'm—a—comin'—back!"

* * * * *

Daniel Hall, who acted as postman to the community, considered himself quite at liberty to discuss the contents of his post-bag. According to his code postcards were public property.

"Here's a bit o' good news for you, Mrs. Padge. Your daughter's a-comin' to pay 'ee a visit," he would announce, as he handed the card to the addressee.

"Good-marnin', Sally," he would say to an old woman who hobbled to the door at his knock; "this here letter feels as though there was summat welcome in it."

For Daniel Hall knew well that, twice a year, she received a little financial remembrance from a lady who befriended her.

Letters for the "Top o' the World" had formerly been infrequent. The house was the last in Daniel's beat. Now he toiled up to it regularly.

"How that boy Jim do write!" he said.

This was seven years after Jim had left the "Top o' the World."

Winnie stood at the gate of the cottage watching Daniel Hall toiling up the hill. A slender, pretty girl, her fair hair shining in the sunlight.

"All right," he exclaimed, as he drew near. "'Tis a foreign stamp on it, Winnie. And it feels as if there was a picture inside, simminly. You'll have to get yours took by Shepherd King again soon, I reckon!"

A blush mounted the girl's cheek as she took the packet from the postman's hands and went inside the cottage. Later in the day she went down to the village shop and bought a gaudy frame. It stood on the chest of drawers in her room that night with Jim's "picture" in it, the photograph of a well-set-up, stalwart youth. She read the letter once again. It told her he was steadily making his way in the new world. One sentence in it ran:

"I'll come back to the old home one of these days."

Somehow or other she never went "walkin' out" with any of the "bloods." She waited.

* * * * *

Ten years after that waggonette had taken the little wastrel into the station, a well-dressed, good-looking young man got out of the junction, shouldered a light travelling bag, and stepped out across the fields towards the Downs. In the village Schoolmaster was leaning over his gate, contemplatively smoking a pipe after his day's work. He looked up on hearing himself accosted. Slowly a look of recognition stole across his face. He never forgot his old boys.

"Why, it's Jim!" he exclaimed; "well, well, well! Where have you come from?"

"Canada."

"Come in and have some tea," said the Schoolmaster, after a few moments' conversation.

But Jim shook his head, smiled, and passed on.

Through the village, out to the white road, up the winding hill to the "Top o' the World." He paused by the cottage gate. Then he opened it softly—and crept up the path through

the garden. The door was ajar. He pushed it open.

"Winnie!"

"Jim!"

"I've come back, Winnie!"

* * * * *

The "Top o' the World" was bathed in golden light as the sun sank lower in the heavens. It was very still and quiet on the "Top o' the World." Perhaps it was a little bit nearer heaven than anywhere else in the Downland. At any rate, that is what it seemed like to two young hearts.

THE CORONATION

XVII

THE CORONATION

"THERE en't ara village in the country what kept Coronation Day better nor we," was the universal verdict afterwards. Indeed, it is doubtful whether, in their opinion, there was any comparison between the ceremony in Westminster Abbey and the festivities in honour of it at Little Marpleton; except that His Majesty, King George the Fifth, was, by force of circumstances, compelled to be present at the former place.

It was one particular phase of the proceedings concerning which the village was more particularly elated. Whereof a record shall be made.

There were, of course, subscriptions. Also a committee, of which Paäson was elected chairman and well supported by Farmers Wood and Gringer and other reputable parishioners. The Committee, when discussing the important subject of the inner man, without which no programme of festivities was complete, fell back—as was expected—on

Bunter, the village baker and grocer. Bunter was a wonderful little man, a veritable Napoleon and born organiser—one of those men whose natural function it is to stand, imperturbable, with folded arms, or hands in pockets, making other people work by sheer force of character.

On Bunter a deputation from the Committee waited, stated what they desired, and explained the limit of finances.

Bunter put a bit of paper on his shop counter and set down quantities of figures with the stump of a pencil. Then he folded his arms, and looked the deputation straight in the face. He had made up his mind.

Quite calmly, as if it was the most ordinary matter in the world, he announced that he would undertake to provide a dinner for every man, woman, and child in the village—there were about 550—the said dinner to consist of hot roast beef and mutton, potatoes and greens, plum-pudding, cheese, and lemonade or "minerals" for such as were teetotallers. And the price of the feast was to be one shilling per head. He would see to all arrangements if Farmer Gringer would clear out his big barn for a banqueting-hall, in which case there would be room for the dinner to take place in two relays.

No, he didn't think he would lose on it. Nor did he expect to make a profit. But he wanted to do his share.

The deputation, with sighs of relief, left the matter in his hands. They knew Bunter. His word was sacred, and his powers of carrying a thing through without disturbing himself extraordinary.

Bunter was lost in that Downland village. He could have catered for an Army Corps at half an hour's notice if the War Office had asked him to do it. Unfortunately for the country, however, he was not the sort of man the War Office *would* have asked. They would probably have refused him as too capable.

Other details were duly arranged, including a royal salute of twenty-one maroons, a public service in the church, sports on the Play Close, comprising, among other events, bowling for a pig—the said pig being offered by Farmer Wood for the purpose — and a bonfire at night.

The programme seemed complete, but the event which was to prove the most worthy of the pride of the village was yet to come.

Over the Downs, some miles from the village, in a large plain surrounded by the hills, was the county rifle range, and the crack of

the Lee-Metford could often be heard when the wind was in the right direction. The War Office had appointed a "range warden," and he had taken a house in the village in order to be near the scene of his labours—the butts on the lonely Downs.

Paäson was in his study one day when the maid announced:

"Sergeant Tomlinson to see you, sir."

Entered the range warden, a fine set-up typical non-commissioned officer.

"Sit down, Sergeant."

The Sergeant sat, bolt upright, on the edge of his chair, cleared his throat, and made an announcement.

"I've been reckoning up the men in the village who have served in the army, sir."

Paäson knew, to use the vernacular, that there were a "smaärt few." The County Regiment was a famous one, and the men of the Downland had done much to make it famous. There were about a score of Little Marpleton men and lads serving then in His Majesty's Forces. Only last week his study had served as an examination hall for Harry Newman, the naval recruiting officer having cycled over from Redford to put the boy through his tests in the three R's.

"Well?" he asked.

"Some of 'em quite old men, sir. There's Joseph Birch—he was through the Crimea—and Samuel Flitney: he's seen active service. You wouldn't think, to look at him now, that Jeremiah Ball was once a lance-corporal in the Gordons."

The Sergeant had taken a list of names from his pocket, and was consulting it.

"Ezra Padge and William Read were in the Volunteers."

"So was I, once," said Paäson.

"Indeed, sir? What rank may I ask?"

"Sergeant," answered Paäson.

"That makes nineteen," said the Sergeant, producing a pencil.

"Nineteen what?"

"Nineteen old soldiers in the village, sir."

"Well?"

"I've got an idea, sir. How would it do to have a parade of old soldiers on Coronation Day? I'd willingly undertake to get them together, and I'd drill them two or three evenings a week on the Play Close after I come back from the range. Broomsticks would have to do instead of rifles," he added reflectively.

"Then," he went on, "we could parade 'em at the sports. They could march past the flag and salute it. And, if the band were

willing, we could march all round the village afterwards."

"Capital idea," said Paäson. "And you shall be Colonel-in-Chief."

The Sergeant accepted his promotion without a scrap of modesty.

"And perhaps you'll act as Captain, sir," he said, making the appointment with great condescension.

Thereupon began a period of exciting interest. The Sergeant was wonderful. He found two more men with the necessary qualifications. But the most marvellous thing he did was to revive the military spirit of sundry extremely ancient veterans. Old men, too much crippled by rheumatism even to walk a few hundred yards to church, tottered out bravely to the Play Close, shouldering broomsticks. Joseph Birch suddenly forgot to stoop at all. Jeremiah Ball discarded his loutish walk and marched up to the parade ground with firm, quick step and a new light in his eyes.

Villagers turned out to watch the drill. Sergeant Tomlinson, swelling with professional pride, roared his crisp words of command to the veterans. The village resounded with "Number!" "Form Fours!" and stentorian ejaculations from the "manual exercise." Not

a single laugh, be it noted. The men who stood in rank before the Sergeant were stern of face and deadly in earnest. The idea of a joke was absolutely removed from their minds. The old, old men, rigid of limb and fixed of purpose, shouldered and presented broomsticks with total disregard of those "rheumatics" of which they had spoken so often. They braced themselves together on the command "Quick —*march*," and went boldly forward over the Play Close with true military precision. They never thought of shirking; the old, half-forgotten discipline had gripped them once more. They were soldiers! Even the "bloods" dared not mock them.

* * * * *

The great day dawned at last. Jim Stacey hauled the Union Jack up the flagstaff on the church tower; the deep-noted bells rang out merrily. There was a goodly number of Church folks at the early celebration. Paäson mounted the tower and fired on its summit the twenty-one maroons, the delighted children in the churchyard below shouting out the number after each bang till there came the regretful "Twenty-one! 'tis all over." A large congregation assembled for the special service, and the nonconformists present were delighted because their local preacher read the lessons.

Farmer Gringer's barn was packed twice, and the redoubtable Bunter was as good as his word and Napoleonic in his attitude, keeping all his subordinates running about with nods and brief commands, and standing still like a rock, with his arms folded and his eyes alert. They fed to repletion in that old barn, decorated with flags and streamers hanging from the oaken rafters, and they came out satisfied, and saying:

"Ah, that were a rare good dinner, that 'twere!"

The sports were held in the Play Close, and Tom Horner, as they thought he might do, won the pig and went homeward in triumph, with the squeaking animal tucked under his arm.

And then came the great event of the day —the Review.

They had done their best, and they turned out marvellously. Old Joseph Birch had found a forage cap, which was perched jauntily on the side of his bald head. He had also got his wife to sew red braid down the seams of his Sunday trousers. Samuel Flitney had hunted out an ancient red tunic which probably fitted him before he became inclined to rotundity, but now had to be laced with string from button to buttonhole across the interven-

ing space on his manly chest. It was rumoured that "orkard" old Jeremiah Ball, late lance-corporal of the Gordon Highlanders, had had a "smaärt few words" with his equally "orkard" old wife, who had caught him purloining one of her petticoats with the intention of appearing in a kilt, but that she, by main force, had retained the garment, forcing him to fall back on a borrowed pair of white flannel trousers, which, with a red jersey and a glengarry-cap, constituted the nearest approach to Scotch costume of which he was capable. The old man with a long white beard, wearing a spiked helmet and a blue frock-coat with a leather belt round it, was William Read, and very well he carried himself, too. Out they came with their bits of old uniform if they had got them, or their attempts to make their ordinary clothing look a trifle military. And not one of them had the vestige of a smile on his face.

The entrance of the Colonel-in-Chief was magnificent, and never to be forgotten. He came upon the field riding an enormous cart-horse borrowed from Farmer Wood. He wore full military costume, with the addition of a very wide crimson sash over his shoulder, and a gigantic Indian sword dangling from his side.

Paäson, acting as Captain, had already paraded the company, and the Colonel-in-Chief advanced towards them with slow, majestic pace, came to a halt, and gravely acknowledged his inferior officer's salute with one hand, while he tugged hard at the bridle with the other to prevent the war steed stooping his head to crop a particularly tempting morsel of grass.

The company was proved, and proceeded first to perform the manual exercise with its broomsticks. Then various evolutions took place. But here a serious difficulty arose. The horse absolutely refused to turn in the desired direction. Every time there was a change of front, half a dozen of the village lads ran to the Colonel's rescue and literally pushed, with their shoulders, the hind-quarters of the obdurate animal till they got him round to the right position.

Finally, the grand march-past took place. Paäson's wife stood on a seat, holding above her the Union Jack; the band struck up the National Anthem; the horse was hoisted round so that his rider might advance at the head of the column. The Colonel-in-Chief, with some difficulty, drew his great sword; the Captain gave the words:

"Quick—march!"

And the column moved forward amid the cheers of the onlookers.

Arrived at the "saluting point," the Colonel brought his sword to the salute, and roared out:

"Eyes *right!*"

It was magnificently done. Only when the word "Halt!" was given the Colonel-in-Chief did not halt. His steed bore him on to the palings at the end of the Play Close, and it was only that barrier that stopped him. No tuggings at the rein achieved that purpose.

After the "Review" there was a procession round the village. And it was a good mile round. The band led, of course. Then came the Colonel-in-Chief in all his glory on the great, heavy-stepping steed; the steed in question, evincing sundry misgivings with regard to the thundering of the big drum, having to be led by two youths grasping his bridle, one on either side. After him came the veterans marching in fours, heads erect and steady. Followed a couple of waggons containing the school children, most of them in fancy dress, waving flags and shouting shrilly. Villagers on foot formed the rest of the procession, some of them in hastily designed costumes. Little Marpleton was keeping the

Coronation in style, there could be no doubt about it!

Those veterans marched the whole circle of the village without stopping and without flinching. Some of them had not walked so far for many a long day, could not, so they averred, get out at all "without 'twas to goo up street," which unkind folks suggested was synonymous with "goin' to public."

But they did it, and were satisfied. Everyone was satisfied. The Colonel-in-Chief rolled off the recalcitrant cart-horse covered with glory. The men of his battalion, finally dismissed and disbanded for ever, walked off to their homes with shouldered broomsticks, in conscious pride; those whose homes lay near or beyond the Blue Lion not exactly passing that establishment with undue haste. Indeed, it was rumoured that there was very nearly a broomstick duel between Jeremiah Ball and Samuel Flitney in the taproom on account of the latter having publicly accused the ancient ex-lance-corporal of being out of step during the march past.

Later, when darkness had fallen, you could see, from the top of the church tower, nigh a score of ruddy bonfires blazing on the heights above and far over the plain on distant hilltops. All was quiet now in the

village below. The night grew darker, the fires still blazed, solitary beacons of the loyalty of the Downland, points of red flame in the blackness, tokens that the men of the uplands loved the country which God had given unto them, red heralds to show that the same spirit which had animated those veterans would, in the days that were coming, inspire the younger generation to give their life-blood for the land of their homes and affections.

The memory of that day lingered. Long afterwards it was said, especially by the veterans themselves, in the words with which this sketch begins:

"There en't ara village in the country what kept Coronation Daäy better nor we."

And probably they were right.

PLACE NAMES

XVIII

PLACE NAMES

"Cut Throat Lane," mentioned in a preceding sketch, was only one of the many place names in and about the village. Some of them were easy enough to detect as far as their origin was concerned; others baffled both research and speculation.

"Going up *lydds*," for example, referring to an ascent of the sides of the Downs, was only a retention of an original Anglo-Saxon word for hillsides. So was that marshy and semi-useless bit of ground in the lower part of the village known as "Slad End," *slad* being the original for a swamp.

"Hunt's grave," of course, was easy to determine, although there was no tombstone or even grassy mound to mark the spot where, doubtless, still lay the remains of the defunct "Hunt," advisedly shorn of his Christian name. For it was no Christian burial that was ever accorded to Hunt. "Hunt's grave" was where the roads crossed just outside the village and Hunt himself was probably a suicide,

buried in the centre of the cross—they would not let him quite escape the symbol of redemption—with a stake driven through him firmly. No one remembered ever having heard anything about Hunt, and probably few ever coupled the name of the place with tragedy and old-time superstitions.

Three out of the four trackways or paths "up lydds" were easily definable. "The Cow Way" was the road up which cows used to be driven to graze on the "cow common." "Wood Way" led to the little wood whence winter fuel was carried down; "Boham's Road" had originally been made by a farmer of that name who cultivated both a lower and an upper farm, and wanted a direct means of communication between the two. Everyone had forgotten about Boham, and none of his name remained anywhere about, but "Boham's Road" is likely to survive to baffle the investigations of future archæologists, who will, doubtless, put a whole series of contradictory and utterly false interpretations upon it, according to the manner of many of their kind.

The fourth road up to the Downs was known as "White Shoot." It was certainly white enough, being all chalk, for ever washed clean by rains—a straggling line up the hillside visible miles away. Whether "Shoot" was

originally "chute" cannot be said with certainty. It decidedly was a chute of water when rain fell heavily.

Two solitary houses up on the Downs, windswept and exposed to all weathers, approached by trackways from "Boham's Road," which were almost impassable in the winter, rejoiced in the names of "Salt Box" and "Slink" respectively. "Salt Box" was evident, the cottage closely resembling an old-fashioned saltcellar. "Slink" was not so easily decipherable, but its origin was interesting as showing the peculiar manner in which "place names" may arise, and the utter impossibility of the most learned archæologist ever solving the thing from mere "book larnin.'"

When the cottage was being built, many years ago, a bricklayer was employed who was a stranger in the neighbourhood. He had fled to the countryside for peace, fled from the constant reproaches, verbal and otherwise, of a termagant wife.

But, alas! his wife tracked him down. Triumphantly she came to the village and went "up lydds" bent on recapture, and, perchance, chastisement. For, in every respect, she seemed to have been his better half. He, unsuspecting mortal, was cheerfully engaged in the leisurely art of laying brick upon brick, pausing

to contemplate his handiwork after each successive brick was laid, according to approved methods when not engaged in piece-work, when, happening to look around, he saw the terror from whom he had fled approaching as an avenging Nemesis. Dropping his trowel he slid, rather than walked down the ladder from the scaffolding, and hid round the corner of the half-completed cottage.

Too late! A shrill voice cried, in the hearing of his fellow-lords of creation:

"I see yer, Bill! Tryin' to *slink* round the carner. Come along out of it!"

History does not record the unhappy future of Bill. But from that day the name *slink* stuck to the house. They tried to call it Rose Cottage long afterwards, but the village was conservative over the matter of names, and they never succeeded.

But why should the word "slink" have made such an impression? There is a reason. Rural vocabularies are very small. "Slink" was an imported word, imported by that rank outsider, Bill's wife. In all probability they had never heard it used before. It was utterly new to them. Few things appeal more to the peculiar humorous sense of the true rustic than the sound of a strange word. They will bandy it about as a joke of the first cream for weeks.

"Told un 'a wor a-tryin' to *slink* round the carner! Haw, haw, haw!"

"*Slink?* Is that what th' 'ooman said?"

"Ah! *Slink* round the carner, she said. Didn't her, Jim? You heered her."

"Ah," assents Jim, "she says, 'tryin' to *slink* round the carner,' she says. I never heered tell o' sich a word afore. Haw, haw, haw!"

And so they went on. And the young "bloods" of the village captured the word and shouted it at bashful maidens, or at shy old Reuben Martin, who always vanished indoors when the group of "bloods" came "up street" o' Sunday afternoons.

The village may have forgotten the incident, but it handed down that new and striking word to posterity. And "Slink" will always be the name of that lonely cottage on the Downs.

Outside the village, on the lower side, was a large meadow known as "Bridus." Paäson, who liked to get at the meaning of things, was baffled in his attempts to discover the origin of this strange name. But one day he met old Amos Weedon sunning himself in the meadow in question. Paäson stopped to have a chat with him.

Amos was a bit reminiscent that afternoon. After making his proud and oft-repeated boast that he had never slept a single night out of

the village ever since he was born there, he began to conjure up the memories of those superior times which only exist in the past, amongst other matters bewailing the fact that the village possessed fewer houses than it did when he was young.

"When I were a lad, sir," he said, "there was a cottage still standin' in this very field—just over there 'twas," and he pointed out the place with his stick.

"And a very nice open spot to live in, too," said Paäson.

But Amos shook his head.

"No one lived in un," he replied, "and they used to say—them as remembered—that no one ever had a-lived in un, 'ceptin' for a few daäys at a time."

"How was that?" asked Paäson, beginning to be puzzled.

"Why, it used to be kept for new married couples to spend their honeymoon in—so they used to saäy when I were a lad."

There was the origin of Bridus apparent at once. The old cottage was originally called the "Bride House." And an interesting chapter of the ancient life and customs of the village was laid bare with the revelation.

Another place name that was delightfully self-evident was the "Play Close." The Play

Close was an irregular green in the very centre of the village, surrounded by orchards and with a stream that bubbled up in a pool under the Downs, flowing on two sides of it. The Play Close was approached by four separate footpaths, two of them leading between ancient mud walls, broadly thatched on top, paths that one could not traverse without being reminded of Balaam and his loquacious ass.

The Play Close *was* a *Close* and *was* a *Play Close*. It was the happiest place in the village for the children. Safe were they from mothers calling them indoors; they could make as much noise as they chose, for noise emphasising the personal element is the great joy of all games, and the Play Close was meant for games. Twice a day, in school-time, they came flocking down the path from the school for the precious fifteen minutes of "recreation," shouting and laughing and quarrelling as to which boy was to "go in first and bat" or which girl was to lead with skipping rope. And there was once an exceedingly silly, utterly foolish and palpably imbecile person, who wrote H.M.I. after his name, visited the school and suggested that there ought to be an asphalted playground, and that the Play Close was too far from the school! (It was exactly 110 yards.) It was the same miserable unin-

structed person who told Tommy Bates, before the whole school, that he ought to wash his face *before he came downstairs in the morning*, and then wondered why all the children laughed at him, and hadn't the common sense to know that no child ever *did* wash his or her face upstairs, but that ablutions were performed over the sink—or a pail of water in the back garden. The silly idiot! Fortunately he was not allowed to carry his suggestions into operation, and the Play Close still remained what it was meant to be.

Thither came groups of children on Saturday holidays, waded in the stream to their hearts' content—and the detriment of their wearing apparel—just as children should do.

The Play Close was sometimes the scene of wider rejoicings. More mature folks remembered the Jubilees of Queen Victoria, younger ones recollected the Coronations of King Edward and King George. And on these occasions there were solemn sports held in the Play Close—to wit, foot races, bowling for pigs, ducking for apples, and the wondrous performances of the village brass band.

Annually, too, came the never-to-be-forgotten festival of Guy Fawkes. Weeks previously boys begged "faggots" and tree loppings from the farmers and Paäson, dragged

them with ropes to the centre of the Close, littering all paths by the way. Slowly but surely the pile arose, higher and higher, and passers through gazed thereon and exclaimed, "Wun't 'em have a bonfire on the fifth, just!"

And when the fifth came the superior "bloods" of the village took matters in hand. Younger fry had made the pile, but they saw to the firing thereof, and made their special contributions, bringing mysterious gifts of tar and oil as an offering to the defunct—the said Guido Fawkes. Moreover, they made their annual collection of the decayed besoms of the inhabitants, broomsticks with very little of the "broom" left thereon. Fireworks they scorned—a few penny or halfpenny squibs or crackers sufficing. But the brooms were the thing. Once the fire was well alight it was etiquette for each "blood" to saturate his broom with tar or paraffin, ignite it and race round the Play Close, whirling the fiery brand about his head, to the terror of all maidens, who *would* stay, nevertheless. It might have been some ancient ceremony of the worship of the fire god. Certainly no pyrotechnic display at the Crystal Palace ever brought so much delight to the spectators as did the orgy of the fifth on the Play Close.

* * * * *

Paäson, who had ceased to be Paäson there, revisited the village after some years, and sat himself down on the "Coronation seat" on the Play Close. Slowly a villager came across the green, his head bowed down. He raised it, recognising Paäson. There was nothing exciting about his greeting—they were a stolid race, but his hand-clasp was a warm one. And Paäson noticed that the man had aged.

"Yes, sir—there was Tom and Peter. Tom was killed out i' th' Dardanelles. And Peter, he died o' wounds in France. And last week we heard as how Harry's killed. There's only Charlie left now—he's on the North Sea somewhere."

He paused, and looked round awkwardly. Then added, "But we'll beat 'em yet, sir—doän't ye think?"

And Paäson, as the man went on, saw Tom and Peter whirling blazing brooms round the bonfire, and Harry, ever naughty, was paddling in that stream—was it only a few days ago?—and using language that he had no business to use. And Charlie—most mischievous of all—was yelling at the wicket and shouting he "warn't out," while all the others were shouting that he was.

And now—only Charlie was left, and he was on the North Sea!

If the playing fields of Eton were ever responsible for great leaders of men, the ancient Play Close of that village, slumbering in the Downland, had surely seen lads who were going to be heroes. But the world never knew it *then !*

DARK DAYS

XIX

DARK DAYS

THE fringe of a black cloud from the outer world came over the quiet, sunny Downland. The cloud spread and the darkness gathered.

A cry from the outer world came ringing over the peaceful Downland, penetrating to the farthest hills and remotest villages! And the cry was for men!

Some of the older men depicted in these sketches never heard that cry. Farmer Wood had gone to his rest. Jim Stacey or William Budd had dug graves in the churchyard for Amos Weedon, Jeremiah Ball, Ezra Padge, and others, who had laid down their tired lives.

But there were many left who heard that call, and answered it, in their calm, dogged way. They left sheep and plough and cattle and walked away, with steadfast purpose, to the recruiting station. The little clusters of "bloods" at the favourite corners thinned perceptibly; the younger men were not seen in the taproom of the Blue Lion, or in the

Working Men's Club o' nights. Lads who, so it seemed to Schoolmaster, had not been long out of his keeping, went to bid him farewell. There was no enthusiastic "send off," no noise about it. They only seemed to melt away. There were few young men with badges in their hats at the Michaelmas hiring fair at Derringford. They had accepted a shilling from another hand than that of the farmer.

By Christmas nearly every man under military age had donned blue or khaki. They all went willingly. It was before the days of compulsion. And they said, "We en't going to wait till we be fetched."

Three years later the sun shone on the golden stubble fields on "lydds"; the sweet fresh breeze blew softly over the high Downs. Standing on the Saint's Mound you beheld the village below, the white church tower, the red and thatched roofs of the cottages, the blue smoke curling upwards.

Just the same Downland village. "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be."

No! As you came down "lydds" from the hilltops your eye lighted on things unfamiliar in the old days. That was not a team of massive horses drawing a plough, and turning the yellow stubble into long brown ridges of

mother earth. No team ever moved across a field so swiftly. A whiff of petrol was borne upon the breeze as the motor-plough came nearer. And a fresh-faced girl, with light smock and slouch hat, grasped the steering-wheel, with oil-stained hands. Old Farmer Gringer used to say that he "didn't hold with those new-fangled things, there was nought to turn the sods equal to a good, old-fashioned Downland plough and a stout team to draw it."

Yet it was across one of Farmer Gringer's fields that the new-fangled bit of machinery was hastening.

Farther down was a bit of late harvest being gathered in. Farmer Briggs always did have a field to be carried after everybody else had finished. And Farmer Briggs, who, in his way, was as conservative as Farmer Gringer, had always maintained that no one but the real, genuine countryman, was ever qualified to work on the land. But those four or five young lads in the harvest-field were no denizens of the Downland. Something in their movements told you that before you came to the field, and when you were near enough to catch the sound of their voices, you knew they never spoke the Downland vernacular. One of them shouted out to a little boy who was leading the empty waggon:

"Bring it across here."

Whereas the correct phrase would have been:

"Bring un athert to we, wull 'ee!"

They were lads from our public schools. And Farmer Briggs, prejudices abandoned, was only too glad to house and feed them; and his old foreman remarked that "they did wonnerful well considerin', and," what was still more incomprehensible, did it "without ara drop o' beer all daäy, look 'ee!" whereat William Budd, to whom the remark was made, shook his head over what he probably considered to be the strange deficiency of the rising generation of the outside world, and replied truly, "They en't loike *we*, then!"

In the village there were other things to note. Bunter's bread cart came "up street," and the driver thereof was Bunter's daughter, arrayed in neat, short skirt, with a satchel slung over her shoulder. And when, as she stepped down outside young Farmer Wood's house, and put loaves in her basket, you asked her what had become of Bunter's man, that pale, delicate-looking fellow, who used to preach in the local chapel, she told you he was "somewhere in the North Sea, with the Fleet," and went on to say that she supposed you'd heard that young Farmer Wood had just got his commission, and was still in France, and that

Mrs. Wood was running the farm, with the help of old Joseph Birch, whose rheumatism was as bad as ever.

The carrier's cart was coming into the village from Derringford, driven by a buxom woman. And before very long you knew that Harry Hurst, the carrier, lay buried among scores of others of the county regiment across the Channel. You would have known this even if no one had told you, for, at the side of the straggling village street was a new erection, with flowers before it, and beneath the words, "The Heroic Dead," on one of the panels, was the name of Harry Hurst, in a column all too long. Dick Webster, that young imp of mischief, had gone; and that taciturn, surly fellow, Jim Blake, had made the great sacrifice. And that good, decent chap, Peter Tomkins—whose cottage was always so well cared for by his bright young wife—he, too, was on the list.

In the orchard by the side of the road two women were on ladders gathering rosy-cheeked apples, for "fruitin'" was just beginning to be in full swing.

The door of the carpenter's shop stood open as you passed "up street" and there was a sound of hammering within. A girl, with her sleeves rolled up, was wielding the hammer. Mine host of the Blue Lion stood, shirt-sleeved

as ever, on his doorstep, but his hair had gone very grey and he had lost the merry twinkle in his eyes. You knew why.

He did not say much when you offered him a word of sympathy. He looked down and muttered something that was half inaudible. But then you knew that the men of the Downland rarely gave outward expression concerning the things in the depths of their souls.

There were so few men about, and they were the older ones, plodding by with slow, weary steps. A sadness had come over the village, all the more sad because it was all so quiet. The Downland lay in the throes of a great, world-wide grief. Yet it had never grudged its sturdy, simple, honest-hearted sons.

Schoolmaster was leaning over his gate, pipe in mouth, a familiar figure in a familiar attitude. He was talking to one of his old boys—one of the village "bloods," who was clothed in khaki. Poor lad, he would never run round the bonfire on the Play Close again. Slowly and painfully he limped away on crutches; and Schoolmaster opened the gate and asked you to come in, that he might tell you all about his own boys at the front.

With all its sadness there was an atmosphere about the Downland that you had never really

grasped before—an atmosphere of simple heroism that brought the sense of an unseen glamour over the great rolling hills and the clustering villages. From God's wide, open country, from the little thatched cottages, from the lonely, remote habitations of the Downs, steadily true to their unobtrusive, silent nature, the men had gone forth cheerfully to give their lives for freedom—for home!

They were men of the open Downland, men who had something of the unfathomable mystery of the wind-swept Downs in their very being. The world had never known that they were heroes all the time, but had sometimes scorned them as country yokels. But the world outside never understood them aright. Like the Downs themselves, they held the secret of their lives in taciturn silence. But God meant the outer world to know the worth of His Downland children.

THE AFTERMATH

XX

THE AFTERMATH

"Paäson," now Vicar of a large town parish, harked back, often, in memory to the Downland village, and one day revisited it. Over three years had elapsed since the termination of the Great War, and he wondered, as he saw the grey tower of the old church, what changes he would find.

Just outside the village he passed a row of six perfectly incongruous dwellings, all built to pattern, and abnormally ugly. The monster yclept the "Housing Scheme" had invaded the Downland and left his uncompromising mark by the roadside.

Tom Horner, dark of face and eye, lean and saturnine, greeted Paäson with a nod as the latter entered the village. Tom Horner had not seen him for years, but the undemonstrative nod was characteristic. Tom was one of the "bad men" of the village, which is to say that none could touch him in the unlawful profession of snaring other people's hares. Moreover, he was possessed of a taciturn but

somewhat ugly temper, and on more than one occasion Paäson and he had fallen out badly in the old days. So much so that once, when in Paäson's study, his language was more forcible than polite, Paäson had told him that if he could not be civil he would put him out of the room.

"I'd like to see 'ee do it!" replied Tom Horner.

"You shall," Paäson had answered.

And incontinently Tom had been precipitated through the open French window on to the lawn outside.

Wherefore, on the present occasion, Tom knew perfectly well what Paäson meant when the latter said to him:

"Well, Tom, you and I haven't met for a long time, eh? When I was here we didn't always agree—but you got rid of me at last!"

Whereupon Tom Horner paid Paäson one of the finest compliments he had ever received.

"We en't bettered 'ee!" he exclaimed, and passed on without another word.

Paäson progressed slowly "up street." Greetings were the order of the day, greetings apparently as undemonstrative as those of Tom Horner, but genuine, all the same. News of themselves and the village were told him simply, nor questions asked of his own doings

—beyond the state of his health. Thus had it ever been. Beyond the confines of the parish they had rarely been interested. Sometimes returning from his summer holiday he had told them of places he had visited and things he had seen. They had listened patiently and courteously, and when he stopped had said:

"The tater crop en't up to much, sir. Them late frostes was a casalty job for taters."

Or:

"Feyther's rheumatiz doän't sim to get no better. 'A be pretty middlin' just now, sir."

Sharp-witted people who live in towns wrote pamphlets and articles prophesying to a nicety the state of the rural villages after the war, telling us that the men who came back would return with a "vision." The word "vision" was as common in such prophecies as the word "reconstruction." These people told us that the men would never again fit in with the old dull routine of village life—that they would "demand" (another common word) fresh conditions, institutes, amusements, facilities for self-education and improvement, and all the rest of it.

And Paäson met Sam Bidmead, who had fought at Gallipoli and in France, and been wounded and decorated and promoted to the rank of sergeant, and was one of those who,

having seen the outer world, was going to reform the conditions of village life. And Sam Bidmead was strangely reticent about Gallipoli and France and all the rest of it, and did not talk of social improvement or higher education, or a virulent desire for a small holding.

"Yes—I be married now, sir. You rec'lect Emma Yates? 'Tis she as I got fur a wife. Come down the garden and have a look at my pigs, sir. They be doin' well. Yes—I works for Muster Wood, saäme as I used to it, and glad enough I be to be whoäm and settled down. And I still rings up at t' church—that 'ere fifth bell be as unked as ever to ring up!"

A small indication of a possible new order of things was hinted at. Paäson was informed by sundry of an event that had taken place in the village the previous day. A "Women's Institute" had blossomed forth and there had been a meeting—and speeches. Three or four motor-cars appeared to have brought in partisans. As old Josiah Collins described it forcibly:

"Ah, you ought to ha' bin here yesterday, sir. There was a meetin' of this here Women's summat or other. I doän't know when I see so many folk about. 'Twas moäre loike London here, yesterday, I reckon!"

War's aftermath was also apparent among the

menfolk of the village, but not in the manner prophesied by the pamphleteers. Matthew Keen had given up those few acres upon which he had toiled so laboriously for years.

"I was forced to it, look 'ee, sir. These en't no toimes for small holdin's, as they calls 'em, wi' prices what they be. I should ha' lost what little I'd got if I'd a kep' on. So I goes to work now on Muster Harris' farm, and glad I be to get regular money. 'Tis a casalty job for a man to work for hisself."

Others, however, had forsaken the land in a different way. The tag end of erstwhile big munition works still dragged along in a big village some four miles away. Thither men still went their way on bicycles in the early morn, for sake of higher wages than the farmer was bound—rather than willing—to give. Not that the farmer seemed to care.

"How many men have I got on the farm? Three. Ah, that's all. And I shall get rid o' one o' them the end o' the week. It doän't pay to have a lot o' men these days. We can't do it."

The same farmer, always hospitable where Paäson was concerned, had invited the latter to the mid-day meal. And—as of yore—there was no stint on the table. A big round of beef, a big ham, salad, vegetables, two big

puddings, a big cheese, and offers of either beer or whisky by way of liquid refreshment.

The farmer garnished the meal with bits of local gossip. In the next parish a new Vicar had arrived, a young man fresh from a large town parish, succeeding one who had died in harness after many years' quiet work. The farmer probably echoed prevailing opinions when he spoke about him.

"Do they like him? Ah, they doän't mind him much, from what I hear. He has some services, too—every day, two on 'em—leastways, all the winter. Plays golf in summer, so he ain't so reg'lar. Oh, no," and he shook his head with a laugh, "people doän't go to 'em. They do say as how the churchwardens ha' told him they won't pay for a new rope to the ting-tang bell if he wears it out ringin' it so often. That's the way they looks at it."

Then he looked at Paäson slyly, and exclaimed abruptly:

"Now, *our* Vicar—shall you be seein' him to-day, sir?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. I've only met him once—for a few minutes."

"Ah! Well, if you do see him, I wish you'd ask him not to preach such long sermons—he does go on—half an hour and more!"

Paäson smiled. The worthy farmer was the

fourteenth person he had met that day who had tried to make him an intermediary on that sermon question. They evidently thought his visit was a glorious opportunity for an ambassadorial protest that might be regarded.

But the farmer, realising that the hope of such a protest being made by Paäson was fruitless, added philosophically:

"Not that I mind him much. I go to sleep generally."

Later on Paäson met William Budd crossing the Play Close, spade and pickaxe on shoulder. He presented a hard, grimy, soil-stained hand, and waxed garrulous.

"Old Sally Spraggins—you remember her, sir? Well, she be took at last. I just bin a diggin' o' a graäve fur her. The churchyard be full up now, sir; there en't no moäre room in un, so we got a cemetery, just outside the village, it be, carner o' where Boham's Roäd turns up to lydds. 'Ten't loike a berryin' ground at all, I ses. Ah—there be a smaärt few changes since you were here. Amos Weedon and Jeremiah Ball and Ezra Padge—all on 'em gone. And Schoolmaster, too. A never simmed the saäme arter his son were killed. Just give up and died, 'a did. Ezra's daughter married Jim Hawkins, son o' old 'Miah Hawkins as kep' the Wheatsheaf.

Jim en't kep' un on, though—gone to Canada 'a be.

"No, sir. 'Cept, as I ses, there be a smaärtish few gone—and some o' the young chaäps what never come back from the fightin'—there en't much altered as I knows on. There was some as said all sorts o' things was goin' to happen when the war was over—but they en't—leastways, I en't seen as they have. We all gets a bit older, but 'tis the saäme world, I ses, all the toime. There be ploughin' and rollin', seed toime and haärvest as the Bible ses, dung cart an' haäy cart an' haärvest cart, tater plantin' an' tater diggin', folks born and folks berried, some as gets along and some as doesn't, some as goes to pub and some as staäys at home. Look at it loike that, sir, and I can't see as we're much better or no ways worse off than we was afore—'cept 'tis knowin' those who are gone—old and young—wun't never come back no moäre. Well, sir, seein' you sims loike old times—an' I dunno, arter all said and done, that old toimes warn't best, lookee—though I did saäy there doän't sim to be much difference."

That was just it. He put it in his roundabout way better than any philosopher could have done. It was, in a sense, "as it was in

the beginning, is now, and ever shall be." And yet in another sense it was not. Was it the aftermath of the Great War, or was it only the aftermath that the years of any period bring to all who have looked back, and loved, and lost?

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